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JUNE

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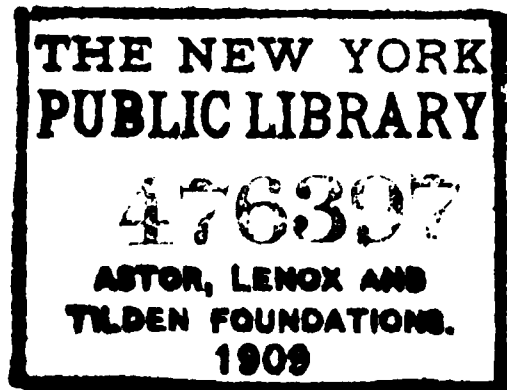
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HEART & SWORD

CHAPTER I

WANT OF MONEY

It was want of money that first put a barrier between them. They had been friends, and in a manner sweethearts, since their most tender years. He, Gregory Alison, the son of a country parson of comfortable means and not too large a family ; she, Kit Mallinder, the niece of an elderly lady who lived in Archdeacon Alison's parish.

In their extreme youth they had never felt the want of money—either of these young people. The Rectory was a large, comfortable, rambling house, kept up lavishly enough, for the living of Little Gracethorpe was an extremely good one. There was always a good cob in the Archdeacon's stables, and a good dinner on the Archdeacon's table. Mrs. Alison and her daughters dressed well, and followed closely, if they did not set, the fashion in the little place. The two boys went to good public schools, and afterwards Gregory passed into the army, and Maurice went to the bar. It was a household of class ; a household which, without any pretentiousness whatever, or any living above itself, yet took the same rank, and in a measure vied, with people who had more or less large estates at the back of them.

Miss Whitaker's establishment, on the other hand, was

conducted on totally different lines. It was refined and elegant. Nothing would have induced Miss Whitaker to eat her dinner earlier than eight o'clock in the evening, and she would rather have gone without that meal than have sat down to it without having made a toilet therefor. Her two servants were the best to be found in Little Gracethorpe, but followers were not allowed, and perquisites were practically nil. Every penny told in that limited household, and Miss Kit's white summer frocks were a source of considerable anxiety to her aunt.

"My dear Kit," she said one day, when the girl was grumbling because she had not a fresh dress in which to go to a tennis party at the Rectory, "you ought to take more care of your clothes, because you know perfectly well how washing ruins them."

"Other girls have heaps of clothes, and I have none," said Kit, dejectedly.

"Don't say that, Kit; you have clothes—a great many clothes, far more than I had at your age. But then, it is true, girls in those days did not play tennis and other romping, hoydenish games of the kind. And we gave a thought sometimes to our garments—which is more than you ever do, my dear."

"Oh, don't preach, auntie," said Kit, rebelliously, and yet very sweetly, "don't preach, dearie. I will wear the old frock; never mind, don't mind. I was a beast to grumble."

"My dear Kit," said Miss Whitaker, "I beg you will not use that kind of language in my presence."

"I won't, auntie; I hear the boys say that kind of thing sometimes."

"Ah, the boys will be the ruin of you," said Miss Whitaker, with severity. "I remember once my dear mother punishing me most severely because one of my brothers taught me to whistle, or, I should say, because she found out that I could whistle much better than my

brothers could. My mother was angry with me because I whistled, and my brother was angry because I whistled better than he did. I think brothers are a mistake, my dear, and other people's brothers are a greater mistake still."

At the beginning of this conversation Kit Mallinder had been standing at the window overlooking the trim and gay garden which spread around the cottage. She turned away from the window, and dropped in a heap at her aunt's feet.

"Do you mean to tell me, auntie, that you ever—whistled?" she cried, breathlessly.

"I am afraid I did, my dear ; you see, I was young," answered the good lady in a tone of distinct apology.

"Young ! Of course you were young. And what harm was there in whistling?"

"It was not very ladylike," murmured Miss Whitaker.

"Ladylike !" echoed Kit. "No, dear. And why isn't whistling ladylike ? Because only one woman in a thousand is capable of whistling even a little tiny bit. I don't wonder that your brother was angry ; he was jealous !" she cried.

"Ah, well, poor fellow, he's been dead and gone this many a year ; and he was fond of me—very fond of me. He left me all that he had to keep me in comfort for the rest of my days. Poor George—poor George !"

There was a moment's silence, while Miss Whitaker sighed over the fate of the loved dead and gone brother. Then Kit spoke.

"Auntie," she said, persuasively.

"Yes, dear child."

"I wish you would do something for me."

"And what is it?"

"Well, I wish you would show me—at least, I wish you would let me hear—do whistle something, auntie."

"Oh, my dear, I couldn't !" exclaimed Miss Whitaker ;

and her tone was that of a person as thoroughly shocked as even her defunct mother could have desired.

“But, auntie, dear, there’s no reason why you couldn’t whistle now just as you did when you were a girl. You’ve no false teeth——”

“Artificial teeth, dear.”

“Well, artificial teeth ; it’s just the same thing. Your teeth are your own ; it is change of teeth that stops people from whistling just as they used to do. Why shouldn’t a lady of your age whistle just as well as a girl of mine?”

“It would not be seemly,” continued Miss Whitaker, shaking her head.

“Seemly ! Well, auntie, I heard the Squire whistling away yesterday just as blithely as could be. It was seemly enough in him, and he is ten years older than you are.”

“I don’t know—I don’t think I could,” said Miss Whitaker, in the tone of one beginning to waver.

“Oh, do try, dearie.”

“If any one was to hear me,” Miss Whitaker objected.

“They would only think it was me ; and girls do things nowadays, you know.”

“But, my dear child——”

“Oh, auntie, dear, do. Just one little air. ‘The Last Rose of Summer,’ auntie.”

Thus adjured, and with several preliminary starts, Miss Whitaker began to whistle the plaintive Irish melody, looking, the while, ridiculously like the Last Rose of Summer herself.

Kit Mallinder was in raptures. She was genuinely and extremely fond of her aunt, but had always, up to that moment, regarded her as the essence of prim propriety, and to see her with her soft faded face puckered up, and to hear this boy’s music as the result, was quite the droll-

est experience that ever had up to that time entered into her life.

Miss Whitaker heard no more that day on the subject of Kit's frock. When the time came for her to go off to the Rectory, she appeared looking very fresh and fair in a gown of white cambric, which was scarcely crushed, her throat, her tiny waist, and her white sailor hat alike encircled by pale blue ribbons.

"My dear Kit," Miss Whitaker cried, "nobody would know that you had not put that gown on an hour ago!"

"Margaret ironed it out for me," said Kit, looking down complacently at her attire. "I shall be all right. Good-bye, auntie."

At seventeen, when the heart is young and the feet are light, small matters of dress do not give trouble for very long. The little gatherings at the Rectory were always bright, and Kit Mallinder's own special attraction in the form of Gregory Alison would be there.

Miss Whitaker looked over the tops of her spectacles as the slim young figure went down the road.

"A sweeter girl," her thoughts ran, "never trod the earth. Another girl might have been disagreeable or sulky. It is hard that she should not have all the advantages of dress which her youth and her pretty face demand."

Meantime, Kit had gone along the shaded country road and turned in at the Rectory gates. Gregory Alison was the first to perceive her, and came—a long, lithe, handsome young man—along the drive to meet her. He was six or seven years older than Kit, and had been for over five years in the Black Horse, otherwise the 25th Dragoons.

"Kit," he said, reproachfully, "you are very late."

"Oh, no, Gregory, that I'm not. Why, it has but just struck three by the church clock. What are you talking of?"

"It seemed late," he said, not pressing the point further. "Anyhow, they've made up a set, and Jeaffreson and Connie are playing a single, so let us go along to the kitchen garden and see what we can get in the way of strawberries."

"They might have waited."

"Never mind, it's just as good. I'd sooner have strawberries than tennis any day, wouldn't you?"

"Well, I don't know that I wouldn't, Gregory."

They turned as she spoke into a side path down the shrubbery.

"Look here," said Gregory Alison, "old Marlow is in the kitchen garden; let us stay here and talk for a while."

He took her hand and drew her into an old-fashioned arbour.

"I don't know why you need mind Marlow," said Kit, who, after her walk up the road, was not averse to the thought of strawberries.

"No, but I wanted to ask you something; we can go and get strawberries at any time. Kit, something has happened to me."

"Something has happened to you! What sort of a something?"

"Well, something has happened to me. I didn't know until this morning that the 25th have had to take the place of the 60th. I thought that we were not to go to India for nearly three years, but since the 60th have had to go to Canada we come next on the roster for India. And that means——" He stopped short and looked at her.

"Well, and that means?"

"It means, my dear Kit, that I shall be in India for eight or ten years."

"Oh, no!"

"You wouldn't mind, would you?"

“Oh, Gregory!”

“Well,” he said, almost roughly, “one never knows what a girl will do. Look here, Kit, we’ve never been exactly spoony, you and I, but I’ve been in love with you ever since—ever since I could walk—well, not quite that, but ever since you could walk. As long as I could see you, and I knew you were safe here, I—I said nothing; but when I know that I’ve got to go to India, to the other side of the world—can’t you understand, Kit?”

“I—I—I suppose you don’t like it,” said Kit, in a demure little voice.

“Don’t like it! Oh, Kit! Why, it’s enough to break my heart. Kit, you won’t let me go away utterly wretched, will you? You’ll give a chap some hope, some encouragement; you’ll—Kit, you do care for me?”

She shot one glance at him out of her grey eyes. The lashes which shaded them were long and dark, but that single glance revealed to the young man all that was in the girl’s heart. He caught her to him with a fierce exclamation, and the next moment was covering her face with kisses.

“Kit, Kit, what does it matter? India, anything, so long as you and I understand each other and are together!” he cried. And Kit, without any further explanation, nestled close to him and forgot strawberries, tennis, frocks, Miss Whitaker, the Archdeacon, everything excepting the bliss of the moment.

They had got no further when nearly an hour had gone by, and half a dozen of the others came gaily along the path in quest of strawberries.

“Sit tight, don’t say anything,” said Gregory, drawing his long legs in and tucking them under the seat. “Pull that white skirt of yours in. There, they’re past. No, here are some of the others coming.”

As the last couple went past they heard a girl’s voice say, “I can’t think why Kit Mallinder hasn’t come.”

"I fancy she did come," returned the man's deeper tones.

"Oh!" with a comprehensive emphasis. "Then they're somewhere about; tucking into the strawberries, I shouldn't wonder," speaking very loudly and clearly.

"Out of it this time, Con," remarked Gregory, as the pair passed on.

"And after all," exclaimed Kit, "they are all going after the strawberries, too; why should they grudge us a few? And they filled up the tennis courts, why should they grudge our amusing ourselves differently?"

He caught at the word jealously.

"Amusing! Do you mean to say that you're amusing yourself with me, Kit?"

"Well, I didn't exactly mean that, Gregory, of course not; you know that perfectly well. But I think that it is rather amusing to—to——"

"To get engaged to one another," said Gregory.

"Well, yes, to get engaged to one another. I think it is distinctly amusing."

"And only amusing?"

"Oh, well, I didn't say that. Don't take me up in that way, Greg; if you do, I shall repent before I know where I am."

He caught her to him again. "My dear, my dear, don't say such things even in jest," he exclaimed, with a certain wistful passion which sat strangely upon his young face. "You shouldn't say such things. You don't seem to realise that we've given ourselves to each other for all time; that it's not a joke we've gone in for, but deadly, sober earnest."

"But I do," she said, almost vexedly; "I understand perfectly well. How can you say such a thing, Gregory? If I didn't understand that, I should certainly not be fit to be your wife, or to be anybody's wife. I wonder," she said, a few minutes later, when he had expressed his

contrition for having doubted her, "I wonder what they will say when they hear of it. I mean the others—your mother, and the Archdeacon, and auntie, and all the rest of them—I wonder what they will say!"

"That we are the most sensible people in the world. I tell you what, Kit, we will go in and have tea—there's the bell—and then we will collar the Archdeacon before he gets out of the road."

CHAPTER II

THE POWERS THAT BE

ARCHDEACON ALISON and his son Gregory were about as unlike in person as any father and son in the whole world. Gregory was long and lithe and dark; the Archdeacon was middle-sized, inclined to portliness, and as fair as a child—as fair as the traditional English child—with a pink and white, clean-shaven face, a pair of seraphic blue eyes, and beautiful courtly manners, something between a parson and a squire. Urbanity was the Archdeacon's strongest point. Tradition in Loamshire said that the Archdeacon had been chosen for the archidiaconal office wholly and solely because of his urbanity. He came into the long, handsome dining-room of the Rectory that day, with a smooth and pleasant greeting, which included the general assembly.

"Ah, young people, have you been enjoying yourselves?"

To which there was a general reply of, "Yes, Mr. Archdeacon," and "Very much, daddy," mingled together.

"You all look very hot," said the Archdeacon, benev-

olently, "excepting my little friend Kit, who is as cool and as fresh as the traditional daisy."

At this the two Alison girls went off into covert giggles of laughter, whereupon Gregory frowned at them, and Kit herself blushed a fine rosy red, which gave her away as completely as her greatest enemy could have wished.

The bland Archdeacon, however, perceived nothing, and when, half an hour later, his eldest son sought him alone in his special sanctum, it was with a face of the blankest astonishment that he heard the news which his son had to tell.

"You propose to marry little Kit!" he exclaimed, blankly. "Why, my dear boy, have you thought what you mean?"

"I think so, sir," said Gregory, just a little haughtily.

"Of course she is a dear little girl," said the Archdeacon, in a tone which told his son that an objection of some sort would certainly follow, "but——"

"But what, sir?"

"Well, what are you going to live upon? That is all."

For the first time Gregory Alison looked distinctly blank.

"To live upon! Well, I suppose upon the usual thing," he said, in a tone almost of indifference.

"The usual thing, my dear boy, for young people to live on is money," said the Archdeacon in his most archidiaconal manner. "You will have a certain amount of money by and by, but not at present. Your mother, naturally, is my first consideration. If it should please the Almighty to take me to himself——"

"Which God forbid," put in Gregory in husky tones.

"Thank you, my dear boy, thank you. But if it should please the Lord to take me—I am only mortal, like other men, and must pay the debt of nature in my time, in the Lord's time—what money I have will go to your mother during her lifetime. It stands, as a matter

of course, my dear boy—as a matter of course—that your mother must be provided for before you youngsters can think of setting up establishments of your own.”

“You’ve no objection to Kit?”

“Objection, my dear boy! My only objection is the want of money. The little girl herself is delightful. Her aunt has been for many years one of my oldest and most valued friends. Of course there are no objections, as objections; simply worldly considerations, my dear boy—worldly considerations, nothing else. But one must think of worldly considerations, Gregory. One’s mind is very well, but one has to think of one’s poor body. Our bodies are always with us. I have always thought that things might have been arranged somewhat differently. It seems hard that we should have to think, at the most unselfish and disinterested moment of our lives, of such worldly things as food and drink, clothing, and the possibilities of a family. If you and little Kit marry, what will you live on?”

“Well, sir, it is quite possible for a cavalry officer in India to live on his pay.”

The Archdeacon smiled in a somewhat superior manner.

“My dear Gregory, my dear boy, I admire your unselfishness and your unworldliness; you are quite right to feel that the girl of your choice is worth any sacrifice you can make. But, my dear Gregory, you have never yet found your allowance more than sufficient for you, I think?”

This delicate hint that he had on more than one occasion had to supplement his elder son’s allowance by a little paternal help brought Gregory, with something of a shudder, to a realisation of the first check in his love-story.

“Yes, I know, sir; but when a fellow is adrift, when he has no particular stay to keep him straight, he spends money without thinking of it.”

“And when a fellow has a wife,” said the Archdeacon, “and half a dozen children——”

“Well, sir, they wouldn’t all come at once,” said Gregory.

“Perhaps not. I would be the first to say ‘God forbid!’ But at the same time, my dear boy, a soldier’s income is not one which goes on increasing with the proportionate rapidity of a soldier’s family. I am not opposing your wishes; I only want you to look at the matter from a strictly business-like point of view, and to think of what you might have to say to yourself half a dozen years hence. Supposing that I say to you, I will give you another hundred a year; that would make four hundred a year. You have never yet as a bachelor lived under three hundred and your pay, and you are not likely, as a married man, to be able to provide for a wife on a less amount. We must be reasonable, Gregory; we must be reasonable before we are chivalrous, or before we allow ourselves to fall in love. On the other hand, my esteemed old friend, Miss Whitaker, may be able to do something for her niece. I fancy not much.”

“Oh, the idea is horrible!” said Gregory, indignantly.

“Yes, it is horrible; but no more horrible than that the child must be fed and clothed—our poor bodies again, Gregory, our poor bodies always with us. My dear boy, I think you had better leave this delicate matter to me. I will go and see my old friend; I am quite sure that I can put it in such a way that she will not take it amiss, whatever I may say. She knows me—she knows me well; ours has been a friendship of long standing, and she knows that I have my own children to provide for, that I am careful and prudent and far-seeing, and these are all qualities for which a father should not be blamed. There is no offence to the little girl in frankly admitting that you and she cannot live—cannot exist, I should say—

upon nothing. I will take my hat and stroll down to the Cottage. Miss Whitaker takes her cup of tea about this hour, and I will talk it over with her."

Gregory put his hand into his father's with gratitude, but, alas ! with a sense of aching at his heart which foreboded ill for the future.

They went together as far as the top of the drive, and then Gregory stood for a moment watching the portly figure of the Archdeacon stepping out firmly, with his neatly gaitered legs, as he set off on his quest. Then he turned away with something of a sigh, and went to seek his newly-affianced sweetheart.

She was looking anxiously around as she sat in a large wicker chair watching the game of tennis which she had declined to join.

"Well?" she said, eagerly, as he drew near to her. "What does he say? Is he very angry?"

"Angry ! No, of course not," said Gregory, without hesitation. Then the thought flashed into his mind that, although his father had not been angry, he had not said one single word either of wishing him happiness, or in commendation of his choice. "What ideas you have," he said ; "as if it was likely that he would be angry !"

"But was he pleased?"

"Well, I think he was rather. He has gone down to see your aunt about it now."

"Gone down to see auntie? Oh, Gregory !"

"Well, she has got to know some time, and the sooner the better."

"I think I had better go home," she said, in a scared voice.

"Not at all." Much better leave them to have their talk out. After all, they are good friends ; we can trust your aunt and my father, surely."

The words struck the girl with something like a chill in the midst of her new-found happiness. It was the first

time that the reality of life had come home to her. Hitherto her greatest grief had been the death of a pet kitten, the withering of a favourite plant, the want of some article of dress. She had had no griefs at all. Her life had been all sunshine—not the vivid glory and radiance of the East, it is true ; rather the constant, bright, temperate warmth of early June in northern latitudes.

They wandered away into seclusion once more, followed by the radiant, laughing eyes of the rest of the young people who formed the party. And the Archdeacon went on his urbane and placid way, touching his hat in reply to many greetings, and finally turned in at the neat gate which guarded the trim and dainty garden of Miss Whitaker's cottage from the dusty high road.

Miss Whitaker was just beginning the cup of tea which she always took at five o'clock.

"Ah, Archdeacon," she said, as his well-dressed figure loomed at the window, "is that you? Come in, come in. I am all alone ; my little girl is at your house, enjoying your hospitality."

"I left her there," said the Archdeacon. "Yes, thank you, Miss Whitaker, I will have a cup of tea. Yes, cream first, as usual. You know there is no tea I like so much as yours. I always tell my wife that—good housekeeper as she is, good cook as she always contrives to be—there is one thing lacking, and that is her tea. She gives two and elevenpence halfpenny a pound for it, but it is not like yours ; I think it is the quality, Miss Whitaker, the quality."

Miss Whitaker, as he well knew, bought a very celebrated brand of tea largely advertised at one and fivepence a pound, so, as was natural, she brindled and bridled as she dispensed the rich and juicy Congo, which, between ourselves, was Indian tea of the commonest description. The Archdeacon stirred the bitter decoction and sipped it manfully.

“Another piece of sugar?”

“Thank you, Miss Whitaker. Ah, and you have a muffin! A muffin is the very nicest thing when it is well cooked. Thank you.” Then he stirred and sipped his tea once more, and remarked that the weather seemed settled at last. “I think for once that rain is not wanted; upon my word, about the first time for twenty years that I have seen the farmers satisfied to have a gleam of sunshine. Oh, the Rectory garden is going on well—yes, extremely well. I have told Marlow to bring you down a basket of vegetables as he goes past to his work; our young marrows are excellent—excellent. But the fact is, Miss Whitaker, I did not come here to tell you that; no, but to speak with you on a more serious subject. Have you noticed anything lately?”

Miss Whitaker looked wise, but looking wise did not help her.

“No, Archdeacon,” she replied, “I have noticed nothing. I have noticed nothing—nothing out of the common.”

“No? Well, I confess, neither had I. But something has been going on under our very noses, and, as usual, we were the last to hear. The fact is that there is a little affair going on between your house and mine.”

“A quarrel? Oh, I hope not, my dear Archdeacon, I hope not, after all these years.”

“I didn’t say it was anything in the nature of a quarrel,” said the Archdeacon.

“You don’t mean Kit, my niece?”

“I do mean Kit, your niece,” said the Archdeacon, taking another sip and another bite.

“And—and——”

“And my son Gregory,” said the Archdeacon.

“And your son Gregory? Dear me! Do you mean to say that they want to make a match of it?”

“I do.”

“But Kit never gave me a hint.”

“I have an idea that it came off this afternoon,” said the Archdeacon. “I think they arrived at a definite understanding between themselves this afternoon, and Gregory, like a good boy—Gregory is a good boy, I am very proud of Gregory—he came to me at once.”

“And you have come to me,” said Miss Whitaker.

“And I have come to you. You see, my dear lady, that good and suitable and charming as these young people are there is one fact which goodness and suitability and charm can never settle, and that is—What are they going to live upon?”

Miss Whitaker looked piously shocked.

“Of course, they cannot live upon nothing.”

“No, they cannot; that is what I told Gregory.” And the Archdeacon played a tune upon his chin with the tips of his fingers with a rapidity which conveyed volumes to Miss Whitaker’s observant eyes. “You see,” he said, “I, perhaps rather foolishly, put Gregory into a cavalry regiment; I allow him three hundred a year, and he has never found it quite enough so far; I have always had to make it up to four or thereabouts. Supposing I make it up to four, or even four and fifty, can they live upon it?”

“I don’t know anything about cavalry regiments, or what are the expenses connected with them,” said Miss Whitaker, helplessly.

“Well, I believe the generally accepted fact is that life under a thousand a year in a cavalry regiment for a married man is not to be thought of. Now, my dear Miss Whitaker, I cannot give my son a thousand a year.”

“Nor I,” she sighed; “though I would if I could, Heaven knows.”

“I am sure you would, and so would I; but as we haven’t got it we cannot give it. Now, what do you think is the best thing to do?”

Miss Whitaker sat bolt upright.

"I don't understand you, Archdeacon," she said at last.

"Well, what do you think this couple had better do? Had we better forbid the engagement——?"

"Forbid the engagement! Oh, poor children, no! Let them be happy while they can."

"Yes; but what are they going to be happy on? I can allow Gregory four hundred a year. That is the best I can do so long as my wife and I are alive; after that he will have four hundred a year more, but not until my wife is gone, supposing that I predecease her, which is not unlikely, as she is about ten years younger than I am. But that is not for the present. They cannot marry on four hundred a year. Are you prepared to do anything?"

Miss Whitaker gave a shudder.

"My dear Archdeacon," said she, in quavering accents, "my dear Archdeacon, I am not a young woman."

"Fifty-three, if you are a day," said he to himself; but aloud he remarked in his most bland manner, "We are none of us young, my dear lady, we are all getting on."

"Yes, dear Archdeacon, that is true. But you know I am not rich; indeed, I have but a slender income, and I really do not see that I can do anything for them. All that I have will be my dear child's when I am gone, but I cannot afford to make anything like an allowance. Even if I suggested that she should have her little dress and pocket-money, as she has had in the past, it would be but a pittance, a drop in the ocean, and it would not suffice to provide for the clothes of a married woman in the position of Gregory's wife—in the position of a lady in a regiment."

"I see nothing for it but telling them that their dream is an impossibility," said the Archdeacon. "It is a cruel thing to do, but it is kinder than letting them buoy themselves up with false hopes."

“Oh, my dear Archdeacon, my dear Archdeacon, don’t crush love’s young dream,” said Miss Whitaker, in a tremulous voice. “I might have been a happy wife now if so much care had not been taken by my revered father and mother over the question of ways and means. They are very young—my little girl is not more than a child—let them wait; a year or two will but cement their love. Let them wait, I entreat you. Don’t, my dear Archdeacon, crush the light out of their lives for ever!”

CHAPTER III

CONSENT

THE immediate result of the Archdeacon’s interview with the mistress of the Cottage was a conversation with his son Gregory.

“My dear boy,” he said, on his return to the Rectory, “I went and had a very long and exhaustive conversation with the old lady. She is not prepared to do anything.”

“I didn’t expect she would,” said Gregory, shortly.

“Well, it is no use being offended at plain speaking, Gregory,” said the Archdeacon, sensibly enough; “neither you nor the little girl can live upon air any more than the rest of the world. Miss Whitaker told me positively that what is hers will eventually be the child’s. You have chosen to think of your heart before your worldly prospects—for which I honour you—but there is nothing but waiting for it.”

“We will wait for a little time, sir,” said Gregory; “and when the time comes for the regiment to go to India we will be married, and exist very well out there on our means.”

The Archdeacon gave a sigh. "I don't know, Greg, I am sure, but I have always understood that India is a place where you want three times as much money as you do in any part of Europe, to live in any sort of comfort. It is true a man gets double pay, but he has to keep fourteen or fifteen servants. But you are young, and the child is young, and you must manage your affairs as you think fit. I like her, and should be delighted to have her for my daughter-in-law, so long as you have sufficient to live upon. All I ask of you is, don't marry in a hurry ; think what you are doing before you do it ; don't take any leap in the dark, because very few people have the luck to leap just into the right place."

In the end Gregory and Kit decided that they would content themselves with being engaged indefinitely. Gregory had a happy-go-lucky, soldierly disposition, and immense faith in the probability of something turning up ; Kit was so intensely happy in the new state of affairs that she never thought of looking beyond the morrow.

And so the days of Gregory's not very long leave wore away, and when he returned to his regiment it was leaving Kit behind him with an engagement ring on her finger, and his image firmly fixed in her heart.

It is a delightful thing for a girl to be engaged to the man of her choice, especially if she lives in the country, and her lover is a handsome, gallant, dashing youth, with all the *éclat* and all the fascination of a soldier. It was astonishing that Kit could be so happy when she and Gregory were apart. Miss Whitaker asked her once or twice if she were quite sure that she cared for him.

"Why, yes," she answered, "of course I care for him ! How can you ask me such a question, auntie ? I adore Gregory ; he is my *beau idéal* of everything that a soldier and an Englishman, and one's future husband should be. What could I wish for more than Gregory is ?"

“You could wish that he were a little richer, my dear,” said Miss Whitaker, rather dryly.

“But he would be Gregory all the same, no matter how rich either of us were !”

So she went on her careless and sunny way, spending a good deal of her time writing long letters to Gregory, and enjoying herself otherwise, whenever the chance of doing so came in her way. She was accepted at the Rectory as a daughter of the house, and took that position with as natural an air as if she had been born so, or as if she were already Gregory’s wife.

And so the days flitted by. The bright tints of summer faded into autumn, and autumn in turn gave place to the chill of winter. Christmas time saw Gregory at the Rectory again, with his long leave before him. What a winter it was ! There were dances, both formal and informal, skating and sleighing parties, festivities, indeed, of all kinds, and finally Maurice Alison, who was a member of a well-known amateur dramatic club, conceived the idea of arranging an entertainment to be given in the school-room of Gracethorpe village. The whole proceedings were kept a profound secret, and when the eventful evening came, it was Kit Mallinder who carried off the histrionic honours. Then the company was asked to repeat the show in the Shire Hall of the neighbouring town of Clayborough for the benefit of the County Hospital, and Kit received such notices in the local papers as would have turned the heads of many a girl of her age. But Kit, happy and secure in Gregory Alison’s love, was not even a little puffed up by her success, and the whole family at the Rectory found that she was even sweeter than they had thought before.

It was rather an expensive time for Miss Whitaker. An engaged young lady, unless she is going to be married immediately, always requires more clothes, and more *et cæteras* in the way of clothing, than at any other time

in her life, and Kit's little needs seemed to be unending. True, Gregory was continually giving her gloves and fans and scent and other apparently trivial presents, which, all the same, ran away with a great deal of money, flowers for any special occasion, expensive bonbons for her to eat—in fact, lavishing his lover's gifts upon her exactly as if he had three thousand a year instead of three hundred. And in spite of these attentions of Gregory, the expense of the engagement was a heavy drain upon Miss Whitaker's slender purse.

"Kit," she said at last, just before Gregory's leave was at an end, "you really must make your pink dress do for Lady William's dance."

"Oh, auntie, I can't!" Kit cried.

"My dear, you must."

"But, auntie, I have torn all the edge off the skirt."

"Then you must go into Clayborough and get a little tulle to match it and mend it up yourself. I cannot afford a new dress; you must make do with what you have. It goes to my heart, child, to deny you anything; but, believe me, I have spent more already than I can afford, or than I ought to have done. You must make do for once."

And Kit did make do. With the aid of Margaret, the housemaid, and with the addition of a little advice and attention from Miss Whitaker herself, the impossible dress was refurnished until even a keen eye could hardly have told it from new. And Kit went to Lady William Crozier's ball, and enjoyed herself almost more than she had ever enjoyed herself in her life.

"It has been a heavenly evening, Greg," she said to Gregory Alison, as they drove home through the frosty moonlight together. "I don't believe—I have a sort of feeling, that is—that we shall never be quite as happy again somehow."

"Oh, my dearest," he cried, shifting the reins into his

right hand that he might put his left arm about her. "Oh, my dearest, don't say that! It is only the beginning—the first one—of a long series of happy evenings, of wonderful days together."

But Kit was perfectly right. That night was destined to be the last careless and joyful evening that she would pass for some little time.

She slipped quietly to her room when Gregory had seen her safely to the door of the Cottage, and getting quickly into bed slept such sleep as only young and happy things ever enjoy. And in the morning Margaret came to her with a scared face and bade her get up, telling her that something dreadful had happened in the night. Another had entered that quiet household besides the happy girl going home from her merry-making—one who had passed the threshold noiselessly and unseen; for Miss Whitaker, the sweet old lady, the dear aunt, the good neighbour, the model mistress, had fallen quietly asleep that winter's night, and was lying at that moment among her pillows, a smile of sweet serenity upon her marble face. She had died, as we all should wish to die, calmly, painlessly, unconsciously. She had died in her sleep, so the doctor said, drifting out from one world into the other as quietly as a baby falls asleep upon its mother's bosom.

The consternation and sorrow expressed in the village was widespread and deep; Kit's grief was overwhelming. In her despair she abandoned herself to a very anguish of distress. The girls from the Rectory, as soon as they heard the news, ran to the Cottage, but felt themselves powerless to deal with this abandonment of woe. So they ran back for their mother, who, with Gregory, coaxed her down to the Rectory and forbade her to enter the Cottage again.

There was no question of her returning to the Cottage. She could not go back alone, with only the two servants,

good and faithful as they had proved themselves to be ; the Rectory was her natural place, and she naturally enough remained there. There was a terrible time of waiting and preparation for the funeral, a few days, during which Kit submitted to be measured for certain black garments, and lay most of her time weeping passionately upon her bed. Then there was a solemn ceremony, made beautiful with many flowers, which consigned the delicate, refined, gentle old lady to her last resting-place. And after that there was blank astonishment and surprise, for the Archdeacon discovered that Miss Whitaker's income had consisted solely of an annuity, an annuity bought for her and left to her by the brother whose favourite she had been. There was a will, oh, yes. It left everything of which she died possessed to her great-niece, Katherine Mallinder. It was made out with all formality of law, but the amount of property which it conveyed might at the outside have been valued at five hundred pounds. The furniture of the little cottage, the silver which had been her mother's, a string of pearls of no particular size, shape, or colour, and three or four old-fashioned gem rings—that was all that came between Kit Mallinder and the world.

A more worldly girl would have thought of giving back his promise to Gregory Alison, and setting him free of his engagement. Kit did not do that, because it never entered her mind.

“Gregory,” she said to him, a few days after the funeral, when his leave was drawing very near to a close, “I have been thinking.”

“About what, sweetheart?”

“Well, you know, I always thought auntie was rather well-off, I mean in her small way, and that when she died—oh, my poor darling, I shall never see her again.” And then she burst out weeping afresh, and Gregory Alison besought her not to trouble herself further.

"I must talk about it," she said, presently, choking down her tears and forcing back her sobs, "because you are going away, Gregory, and it has got to be faced sooner or later. Greg, why did you ask me to marry you? I am not even such a good match for you as I thought I was."

"My dearest, we can't help that now," said he, very kindly.

"No, perhaps not; and yet, and yet, Greg, we've got to face one thing—that, as your father said when we first became engaged, we can't live upon nothing. You've wasted all your money upon me these last few months—enough to have kept me for a year."

"Oh, nothing of the kind, a few little trifling presents that a tenner would cover at the outside."

"No, Gregory, I only wish it were so; I'm afraid I've been dreadfully thoughtless, and you, too. But there's one thing very certain, and that is that we have got to face the truth now. We can't live upon nothing, and I can't go on living here much longer."

"My dear child! Surely my people haven't made you feel unwelcome? Believe me, they had no intention of doing that."

"No, Greg, they've been goodness and kindness itself. But I'm not their daughter—I'm not one of you yet; and until we are married I must do something for myself."

"Do something for yourself!" he echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I must earn my living in some way."

"Earn your living! What preposterous nonsense!"

"It is not nonsense, Gregory, it is necessity," she said, with a strange, childlike dignity which would have made him laugh at a time less painful and less serious.

"But, my dear child, what can you do?"

"I don't know yet. But I want you to promise me, before you go away, that you will not oppose me in any-

thing that I find. Greg," she said, putting her hand upon his arm and looking very frail and small in her deep mourning attire, "Greg, no work can be derogatory ; dear auntie always told me so. Perhaps she knew that I might have to do something some day, and she wanted to prepare me for the time when people mightn't think quite so much of me."

"But—it's—it's—it's absurd!" he exclaimed.

"No, dear, it's not absurd—it's true. You work, don't you?"

"That I do, and precious hard sometimes."

"Then why shouldn't I work, too? It would be a pleasure to me and a glory to me. Your people can never feel, if I do something, if it is only to put on the time, that I sat down with folded hands and let them put bread into my mouth until you were ready to marry me. If you were rich, dear boy, I would say let us be married to-morrow ; but you are not rich, and we cannot be married—your father says so. So we will just do the best we can until Fate brings us together again. And you will never forget me, Greg ; you will remember always that I am thinking of you, and in a sense working for you?"

He was so touched that he could not speak ; something like tears came into his eyes, this proud young man in the very zenith of his youth, this soldier who had given his heart for love, and for love alone. There mingled with his emotion a feeling that he ought to have thought more of the future ; that he ought to have guarded against such a possibility as this ; that he had been her lover in no very true sense ; that the pleasant time of the past was a time to be looked back upon with something of shame ; that he was not, in truth, worthy of the girl who had cast in her lot with his.

"Can you imagine," he said at length, when he could trust himself to speak, "can you realise what it is to me to have such words pass between us? That you—you

little, soft, tender, gentle thing—should suggest going out into the world to earn your living. What can you do? Go and be a lady's maid, go into a shop? What have you in your mind?"

"I have an idea in my head," she said; "but it is neither to be a lady's maid nor to go into a shop. All I want is your consent. Stay here I cannot. You have never thought me proud before. I should be proud to share your money if you could keep a roof over our heads; my pride will not let me stay here a pensioner upon your father's bounty; that I cannot do, and you must never ask me to do it. I think that I see my way clear. I will stay here a few days, when you have given me your promise, and we will have the rest of our time together, Greg, in perfect peace, without any discussions or differences of opinion. They may possibly come afterwards. I see," she said, with still that quaint and childlike dignity which was so new to her, "I see that you are surprised to think that I have a brain which can act independently of others. Dear boy, I have never had to act before, I have had everything done for me; all my life I have been thought for and cared for, and I never knew what it was, until now, to be grateful for it. And now I am going to show you and all those who know me that I am worth something; that I am not a useless log or a child to be thought for only by others. At all events, with your consent, I am going to try and do something for myself."

"But what?"

"That," she said, "I cannot tell you to-day. When you are gone I am going to London for two or three days, and I shall be able afterwards to tell you everything, if my plans turn out as I expect. All I want is your consent, Gregory, to leave me a free hand."

In reply to which Gregory Alison caught her in his arms and kissed her many times.

“My little love,” he said, “my sweetheart, I would that you had asked me for something that was harder to give than the consent that you shall do as you like and that I will trust you implicitly, as I would trust you if you were already my wife.”

CHAPTER IV

SIR JOHN TRENCH, Q.C.

THE few days' visit to London, of which Kit Mallinder had spoken to Gregory, was the subject of a battle-royal between the girl and the powers that ruled at the Rectory. For once in her life Mrs. Alison forgot to be easy-going.

“My dear child,” she said in a very decided tone, “if you want to go to London on business the Archdeacon will take you and will bring you back again. Going to London for a few days on business is an indefinite arrangement to which I shall never give my consent.”

“Mrs. Alison,” said the girl, turning very pale, “I haven't asked your consent.”

“Kit !”

“No, Mrs. Alison ; I have Gregory's consent, and that is sufficient for me.”

“A mere child like you !” fumed the Archdeacon's wife.

“I am not such a child,” said Kit, with her pathetic dignity well to the front ; “and if Gregory knows, it is enough.”

“Gregory has not all the wisdom in the world !” exclaimed his mother, vexedly. “Perhaps Gregory's mother knows better even than Gregory.”

“Possibly that is so ; but, as far as I am concerned,

Gregory's consent is enough. Please do not say any more about it."

"I disapprove of it utterly. Where are you going?"

"I will tell you all when I come back," said the girl, who was doggedly determined not to open her mouth further than was absolutely necessary.

"I suppose you are going to an hotel?" exclaimed Mrs. Alison.

"No ; I shall go to the house where auntie and I always stayed together, where they know me very well."

"A boarding-house !" cried Mrs. Alison, in highest disgust.

"It is not exactly a boarding-house," said Kit. "Auntie thought most highly of Mrs. Johnson. She is a most worthy person ; auntie always said so."

"But why are you going on this wild-goose chase? Why cannot you confide in us? If it is some remembrance of your aunt, or some business that your aunt wished you to transact in case of her death, why cannot you confide in us?"

"I will confide in you when I come back," said Kit, with a determination equally as strong as that of her future mother-in-law.

"Listen to me, Kit," said Mrs. Alison, suddenly stiffening herself, and speaking in an extremely severe tone.

"I should be sorry to say anything which you might fancy was unkind at such a time as this, but it seems to me that you are treating us in a very extraordinary manner. You have taken a place in the house as one of my daughters, and you defy me in a way which my own daughters would not dare to do. Do you think that is right?"

"No, Mrs. Alison," said Kit, looking straight at her sweetheart's mother, "that certainly would not be right. I have not taken the place of a daughter in your house ; I shall do that, I hope, when I become Gregory's wife,

but not before. I am staying here as your guest for a few days. I thank you very much for your hospitality, but I cannot give my freedom in return for it."

"You are doing what?"

"I do not understand you," said Kit.

"Did you say that you were here as my guest?"

"And am I not?" the girl asked.

"Here as a guest!" Mrs. Alison repeated, in a tone of intense surprise.

"Surely. When you brought me here when dear auntie died," with a spasm crossing her face which even her new-found dignity could not wholly hide, "there was no suggestion, and in my mind no thought, of my coming here in any other way."

For a minute or two Mrs. Alison drummed impatiently upon the breakfast-table with her dainty fingers.

"Kit," she said at last, "I think you do not realise how very different your position here is to what it would have been if your poor aunt had told us that—that—that—that her income was chiefly from an annuity."

"Wouldn't you have asked me if you had known?" said Kit, simply.

"Oh, no, no, my dear child, I don't say that at all; but, my dear Kit, you must be perfectly aware that this has put your marriage with Gregory further off than ever, and you ought to be more amenable to our wishes, more anxious to please us."

"I could not be more anxious to please Gregory than I am."

"I am sure Gregory could not wish you to go off on this wild-goose chase by yourself."

"Gregory knows—Gregory has consented. Please, Mrs. Alison, don't say anything more about it. I am quite to be trusted, and I will tell you everything as soon as I return."

She rose from her seat at the table and went away.

Mrs. Alison said not a word until the door had closed behind her. Then she looked down the breakfast table at the Archdeacon.

“Did you ever see such an obstinate little minx in all your life, Freddy?”

“Well, well, well, the child is in trouble, my dear. I think you were very hard upon her.”

“That is what you men always say. Let the pretty little girl do what she likes, go where she pleases, get into what scrapes she can—and then you will have to help her out of them. I can’t think what that foolish boy, Gregory, wanted to get engaged to her for.”

“Exactly for the same reason that I got engaged to you, my dear,” said the Archdeacon in his smoothest tones.

“Yes, that’s all very well, all very well ; but it is tiresome that he should tie himself up to a girl so young and without a penny. What can she be going to London for?”

“I really don’t know, Arabella, and, not knowing, can’t say,” said the Archdeacon, turning his newspaper with a resigned air ; “but certain it is that she doesn’t mean to satisfy your curiosity until she comes back again, and so you had far better possess your soul in patience until she returns. After all, as the child says, she has Gregory’s consent, and that is really all that is necessary.”

Later in the day Kit went off to London by herself. Her future mother-in-law gave her the edge of a cheek to kiss, and the Archdeacon himself drove her to the station.

“You have money enough, my dear?” he said, kindly.

“Oh, yes, I have quite enough money, thank you, dear Mr. Archdeacon.”

So she went away with a kindly impression on her mind after all, with the Archdeacon’s charming pink and white, childlike face smiling an adieu. And at last she was off on her way to face the world.

Arrived in London, she drove, as she had been used to do on the occasions when she had come with her aunt, to the small and select private hotel where she had arranged to stay. The good lady who conducted this highly respectable domicile came to the door to meet her, took her in her arms, kissed her, and made so much fuss over her, that the grief-stricken heart of the girl was touched beyond measure. The old lady drew her into her own little sanctum, where she had a cup of tea awaiting her, and there she made her sit by the fire and drink her tea while she heard the story of poor Miss Whitaker's sudden end.

"And are you going to stay there, my dear?" the old lady asked.

"Not in Little Gracethorpe ; oh, no, I think not. I have come up to see a very great friend of auntie's on business. I shall be there, to and fro, with the Archdeacon at the Rectory, because, of course, he is—he is the father of the man that I am going to marry, and they were great friends of dear auntie's, and, of course, I have known them all my life. I shall go sometimes to them, but I—I want to live in London ; at least, I think I shall have to live in London for the present, until I am married, at all events."

Mrs. Johnson forbore to tease the girl with any more questions. She made very much of her that evening, insisted upon her tasting this dish and that, and kept the other young people staying in the house from taxing her with too many questions or too much conversation.

And the following morning, when she had breakfasted, Kit sallied forth, and hailing a cab, got into it, and was driven away in the direction of the city. She felt sad and yet strangely elated as she drove through the busy streets that sharp winter's morning. Once in the Strand she was soon at her destination, and having paid the fare, she turned up a narrow covered passage, and found her-

self in a small, flagged courtyard surrounded by tall, old-fashioned houses. She counted the numbers, and, turning into the portal of number seven, she passed up the stairs until she came to a door on the first floor, on which was written, "Sir John Trench." At this she knocked a timid little tap, which met no response; then she tried again, this time a little more loudly, in reply to which a stentorian voice from within roared to her to enter. She opened the door, and found herself in a room where two clerks were sitting, each at a separate desk.

"Can I see Sir John Trench?" she asked, half-hesitatingly.

One of the clerks looked up.

"Miss Mallinder?" he asked in an interrogative tone.

"Yes, that is my name; Sir John Trench expects to see me."

He got up at once.

"Yes, madam, please come this way. Sir John is waiting for you."

"Poor little thing!" he remarked to his companion as he sat down at his desk again.

Meantime, with a quickly-beating heart, Kit Mallinder had walked into the presence of the great Q. C., Sir John Trench.

"I hope," she said, as she laid her hand in his, "that you do not think me very bold to come here and ask advice of you."

He was a very tall and large man, and he stood looking down upon her with a very kindly expression upon his clean-shaven, rather ugly face.

"My dear Miss Mallinder," he said, speaking in a rich, mellow voice, "it is a perfectly natural thing that your aunt's niece should come here to ask advice of me. We were great friends, she and I; I regret her death deeply. Sit down, my dear young lady; if there is

anything that I can do to serve you, why, it is done already."

She hesitated for a moment.

"Well," she said, "I ought to tell you that auntie has not left me much to live upon—all that she had, poor darling, but it was not much, because she lived herself upon an annuity. I didn't know it. Auntie never told me; she always seemed to think that money should not be talked about—as if it were not quite ladylike to talk about money. But now I am left I have got to think about money, and to think a lot."

"Ah, that often happens so," said Sir John, in the tone of one to whom nothing can come as a surprise. "Of course I knew that your aunt never had much money, but I thought of late years that she had enough to live upon."

"So she had, but it was from an annuity. My uncle George bought an annuity for her—left it to her," Kit explained. "And I—I want to earn money, and I want you to help me."

"To help you to earn money! Ah, now you have set me a difficult task," he said.

"I don't think so," said Kit. "You know everybody. I want to go on the stage, Sir John."

"Go on the stage! My dear child, all young ladies want to go on the stage."

"Yes, I know they say so; I know they say that it's the dream of every woman's life. But I am different. I am not afraid of work, and I have ability, I have talent. See—look at this. She hastily drew from the recesses of her muff an envelope containing half a dozen slips of newspaper, just the few paragraphs which had been written about the theatricals at Little Gracethorpe.

Sir John just glanced at them.

"My dear child," he said, "you don't need me to tell you that it is one thing to play to a friendly audience in

one's own village, and it is quite another thing to make one's living by acting out in the world."

"I am not afraid," said Kit.

"They never are!" said the great Q. C., shaking his head solemnly. "I never knew a girl who wanted to go on the stage who was afraid of anything yet. They say, you know, my dear child, that every private soldier in the French army carries a Field Marshal's bâton in his knapsack, and equally certain is it that every girl who desires to go on the stage feels that she can, without any trouble or drawback, become an Ellen Terry or a Sarah Bernhardt."

"But, Sir John," said Kit, beseechingly, "won't you give me a chance? You know all these people—there is not a manager in London that you don't know intimately. I don't ask you to do more than give me just a chance; I can do the rest for myself. It is the chance I want, just the chance of a hearing."

He looked at her hard for just a minute or so.

"Where are you living now?" he asked, abruptly.

"I am staying at the Rectory for a few days."

"With the Alisons?"

"Yes."

"And what do they think of this crack-brained scheme of yours?"

"I haven't told them yet. They didn't quite like—at least, Mrs. Alison didn't quite like—my coming to London without my having somebody with me to take care of me; but I had Gregory's consent, so I didn't think it mattered."

"Gregory? Is that young Alison?"

"Yes. I am going to marry him, you know, some day; but I am afraid it will be a long time first, as we haven't either of us got any money."

"And you want to make some?"

"Yes. I want to make some if I can."

“What does he do?”

“He is in the Service. He is going out to India next year.”

“Ah, really! What regiment?”

“The Black Horse.”

“I see. Not much money-making in that. And he doesn't mind you going on the stage?”

“I have his consent to do as I like,” said Kit, flushing painfully at thus in a measure deceiving him.

“And you think you will become a famous young woman! My dear child, it is a very hard and a very precarious life. It is only one out of a thousand or so that makes a decent living at it. Be persuaded. Go back to Gracethorpe, teach children, do anything rather than break your heart on the stage. It is not a life for a little delicate thing like you, brought up in the depths of the country as you have been; you'd never hold your own in such a life. You don't know what you are doing when you suggest it.”

“No,” said she, “I don't know, any more than you knew what you were doing when you first went to the bar. They say that the bar is overstocked; that barristers are running about all over the world without a chance of a brief; and yet, Sir John, some get on. You were not born rich, were you?”

“Born rich!” he echoed. “No, that I wasn't.”

“Then why shouldn't I have a chance of getting on too? Everybody is fond of telling us that there is no royal road to success; that there is always room for talent at the top. I have got talent—I feel it bursting in me here,” striking her hand upon her breast. “Only give me a chance. If I fail, there will be no disgrace in it. And I promise you that I will not fail; the inducement to get on would be too strong, the fear of what I should have to face, of the ‘I told you so.’ Oh, I would rather die than fail, if once I got a chance; but the chance I must have.”

He put yet another question to her ere he spoke definitely about her desires.

"Tell me," he said, "you were very fond of your aunt?"

"I adored her," said she, almost indignant at the question.

"And how would she have liked this mood of yours—would she have approved?"

Kit flushed up, then paled. "Sir John," she said, "you didn't know auntie as I did. You may, well as you knew her and intimate as you were with her, have been among those who looked upon her just as an old lady with no particular ideas and no particular mind of her own. My aunt was a most wide-minded and enlightened woman; she never abused ideas just because they were new to her. She believed in the advancement of women; she believed in their doing what God had put into their minds to do; there was nothing narrow, nothing cramped about her. I think if she were here—back again—and she knew just how I am placed, I believe that she would bid me go on and do my very best. That is what I honestly think."

Sir John's ugly, mobile face changed.

"You are right," he said. "I did not know her of late years as well as I once did. It was by no fault of mine." He passed his hands across his eyes as if to shut out unwelcome memories. "I am convinced that she would continue to be, as she always was in the old days, wide-minded. So you want a chance, little lady; you want me to go to one of my friends of the theatres and ask them to put you on. They won't do much for you at the beginning—they may give you a show just to oblige me, but it will be a very small business. Have you anything that you can live upon—enough to supplement the salary that you will receive?"

"I have enough," she replied, "for my present needs.

My aunt left me all that she had, and I was to receive it as soon as I was eighteen, if she should die before my birthday."

"And you are——"

"I am eighteen and a half," she replied.

"Well, I will do my best for you, I will do my best. Come back in a couple of days, and perhaps I may have news for you. Only," putting out a warning finger, "don't be disappointed if my friends the managers will have none of you."

"But you will do your best?" she asked, anxiously.

"Yes, I will honestly do my best to get you some sort of a show. But, you poor little countrybred mouse, I feel that I am condemning you to hard labour for life for the crime of being poor."

CHAPTER V

INFLUENCE

THAT afternoon Sir John Trench left his chambers fully an hour before his usual time. Instead of going westward, as was his wont, he turned off to the right, and soon found himself at the door of a very celebrated Bohemian club.

"Do you happen to know if Mr. Everard is here?" he asked of the hall porter.

"I'm not sure, Sir John; he was here, for I gave him a couple of letters less than half an hour ago. I have not been in the office all the time, and my assistant has gone to his tea. I'll find out, Sir John, if you will wait a minute."

"No, no, I'll see for myself: I'm going upstairs."

The gentleman for whom he had inquired was in the reading-room of the club, buried in a newspaper.

"Oh, you are here," said Sir John, clapping a familiar hand upon his shoulder.

The man thus addressed looked up with a start.

"Hullo, Trench! Is that you? How goes the world with you, old fellow?"

"Thank you, pretty much as usual. I was just inquiring for you."

"For me! Coming to see the show to-night?"

"No, old chap, I'm not coming to see the show; I've seen it twice already. No, it's not that; no. I say, old chap, I want you to do something for me."

"Do something for you! All right, old fellow. Shall we have a drink over it?"

"No, thank you, I never drink at this time of day. It doesn't do in my profession."

"Nor in mine," said the manager, quickly. "But have a cup of tea over it."

"Ah, I don't mind that."

The manager walked to the bell and rang it.

"Come and sit over here by the window. Oh, William, bring tea for two, and have you any muffins?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then let us have muffins, and as quick as you can. Let us sit in the window, Trench. I always say that this is the dulllest room in London."

The room might be dull, but the window was certainly not so, and the two men, who had the room to themselves, settled themselves down in a couple of easy-chairs as untrammelled by the rest of the world as if they had been in the private house of either of them.

"And what is it you want?" asked Everard.

"Well, I want the usual thing—a show for a little friend of mine."

The theatrical manager whistled.

“Hullo, Trench, Trench !” he exclaimed.

Sir John laughed. “It’s nothing of that kind,” he said, in a tone which carried conviction with it. “When I start that kind of thing I shall not worry my friends either to gratify an ambition or to provide a justification. This little girl is not exactly a ward of mine, but her guardian was one of my oldest and dearest friends : one of the few great friends that I have had in all my life.”

“Why, Trench, I thought that you had shoals of friends !”

“Of prosperity friends, yes, my dear Everard, thousands of them, but of heart friends very few. I could count them on the fingers of my two hands. This little girl’s guardian was one of them, and stood highest even among them. She is not left very well off——”

“She’s pretty ?”

“Very pretty.”

“Clever ?”

“Very clever. Brimful and bursting over with dramatic talent.”

“They are all, my dear fellow,” said Everard, helping himself to muffin.

“Well, yes, I suppose they all are, till they are tried. But I wish you would give this one a trial, if in ever such a small way.”

“A trial——” said the manager, dubiously. “I might take her on at a guinea a week—for you.”

“Yes, but will you give her anything to do ?”

“No, I can’t give her anything to do, that is out of the question. You see the piece has only been on a fortnight, and it is such a blazing success that there is not the least chance of its going off before the very end of the season ; it will see the season out as sure as eggs are eggs. There’s not a place to spare in it, nor likely to be. The company is in superb health, brilliant spirits ; nothing is in the least likely to happen. I can take her

on, to oblige you, and let her understudy Kate Dempster's understudy at a guinea a week, but more than that, old fellow, I cannot do, even for you."

"And that wouldn't give her a show," said Sir John, doubtfully.

"No, I couldn't give her a show at present. You see how I'm situated, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, yes; of course I didn't expect to have a leading lady's part drop into her mouth like a ripe cherry, neither did she. She is prepared to work."

"Yes; they mostly are," said the manager.

"I'd like to get her into a respectable theatre under a friend of mine," said Sir John. "May I leave it open?"

"Certainly."

"You couldn't put her on one of the country companies?"

"Well, I might do that, but not to do much good. Still, try round one or two of the others, and think over what I have offered you."

On this understanding the two men parted—Everard, the manager of the Frivolity, to chuckle over Sir John's little affair, as he believed it; Sir John, to get into a cab and go to three or four theatres in the hope of finding their respective lords. In that, however, he was unfortunate, and dinner time arrived before he had seen so much as the coat-tails of another manager besides Frederick Everard.

He was due to go to a large dinner party that evening, and when he reached his house in Chesham Place, he found the lady who presided over his home and life dressed and awaiting him.

"You will be very late, John," she said.

"My dear, I am rather late, but Scott is sure to have everything ready for me. I will be as quick as I possibly can."

She did not upbraid him, as many a less wise woman

might have done. Lady Trench was a person whom nothing ever put out. She had married Sir John from motives of ambition. She had been well dowered, and at the time of their marriage the rising young barrister had seemed to her the most likely of all men to land her high upon the pinnacle of name and fame. She had never made the mistake of undervaluing his profession. In all the dealings of life, Sir John's profession was kept first and foremost. If they were late for a dinner, she would rustle into a crowded drawing-room with a bland and urbane "So sorry to have kept you, dear Lady So-and-So," or "dear Mrs. So-and-So, but Sir John's time is never his own. You really ought not to ask us to dinner. Once he gets into his chambers there is no knowing at what hour he may be free." So on that evening, instead of flurrying him by reproaches, she sat herself calmly down by the drawing-room fire, and took up an evening paper, which she read quietly until he appeared again.

"I have not kept you waiting very long, have I?"

He was always studiously polite to his wife, and scrupulously careful of her convenience.

"Not at all, not at all. We shall be ten minutes late, but they will forgive you."

They were, however, not the latest arrivals, and Lady Trench sailed into the beautiful drawing-room of the house to which they were bidden with an air as if they had come ten minutes before their time.

From this house they went on to a large evening party, and just as Sir John was beginning to think that he might steal an hour to run round to his club again, with the hope of coming across one or two others of the men whom he was so anxious to find, he saw a man who was at once a great actor and a great manager coming across the room towards him.

"Ah, John!" was the great actor's greeting.

“My dear Lavender !” said the great Counsel ; “I was just thinking about you.”

“About me?” said Mr. Lavender.

“Yes, about you. I looked in at the Terpsichore this afternoon, but you were not anywhere to be seen.”

“I never go there until the evening, and generally late at that,” said Lavender.

“Ah ! Well, I was just thinking of going round there to find you.”

“And what do you want of me?”

“My dear fellow,” said Sir John, “I want to find a vacancy in a theatre.”

“Oh, Lord !” The exclamation slipped out quite involuntarily.

Sir John groaned on hearing it.

“Ah, I thought you’d say that. Look here; don’t imagine I’ve let myself in, or anything of that kind. It’s a genuine thing enough.” And he went on to tell the actor the same story that he had told to the manager of the Frivolity earlier in the day.

“A real little high-flown genius, eh?” said Lavender, turning and looking with no little amusement in his hawk’s eyes at the great Queen’s Counsel. “John, my dear fellow, I’d rather by far have the ordinary thing than a real live genius in its teens. Genius in its teens is an awful thing, John—a terrible thing, a bitter responsibility. Are you deadly in earnest?”

“Yes, my dear Lavender, I’m deadly in earnest.”

“Oh, Lord !” said the manager again ; “that’s bad hearing.”

“Lavender, you mistake me,” said Sir John ; “it is not that kind of thing at all.”

“No, my dear fellow, it never is, it never is ! I never knew a man yet who wanted to get a place for a real little genius in its teens who would admit that it was the usual thing.”

“I tell you that this girl is engaged to be married.”

“Eh?”

“Is engaged to be married,” said Sir John.

“Indeed? Who is the man?”

“The man is a decent young fellow—son of an Arch-deacon.”

“What is he? Where is he?”

“Somewhere in a cavalry regiment.”

“Worse and worse!” said the great actor, quizzically.

“I don’t see that.”

“The girl’s a lady?” Lavender continued.

“Out and out lady,” said Sir John, with emphasis.

“And brimful of genius?”

“Well, she says she is.”

“Oh, then you don’t know?”

“No, I don’t know. I believe she’s very clever.”

“Why does she want to go on the stage?”

“Because there’s no money. She lived with an aunt, who lived on an annuity. She has left her practically penniless. She is extremely pretty; good, slight figure; beautiful eyes and hair; a well-modulated voice—and she says she’s bursting with talent. It’s her one idea.”

“Look here,” said Lavender, dropping his bantering tone, and looking the Q. C. straight in the face, “what is she to you? Your daughter?”

“No, not my daughter; but the aunt with whom she lived was an old sweetheart of mine, and for the aunt’s sake I’d like to help the little girl. Nothing more than that, Lavender, I assure you.”

“Well, now, look here,” said the actor, putting his hand on Sir John’s shoulder, “send her down to me. Send her to me at one o’clock to-morrow—to the theatre. I will see what she can do. I can’t make her my leading lady,” with the sweet, swift smile which was one of his most endearing attributes; “but if there is anything in her, I will see if I can find her a corner.”

“My dear chap, you are too good ! I always knew that you were,” said Sir John, with a sudden gush of feeling.

“Well, tell your little girl, before she sees me, that if I can do anything it will be but a little corner ; and you can tell her that there was some poet fellow who said, ‘From a corner we can look up into heaven.’ And, egad, if there’s genius there, it’s never in a corner that it stays, and that’s as certain as that the sparks fly upward.”

Even although they were deeply engrossed in talking to each other, neither Sir John Trench nor Lavender, the actor, were men whom any hostess would leave long neglected. The great lady whose guests they were bore down upon them at that moment.

“I positively cannot allow you two to monopolise each other. The whole world is crying out for both of you ! Sir John, the Duchess wonders that you have not been to speak to her ; Mr. Lavender, I particularly wish to make you known to Lady Lorimer.”

So the friends were swept away from one another, and Sir John went home to his bed that night, feeling that the little girl’s chance was practically secured, and Lavender went to his, with a curious sensation of having committed sacrilege.

The two were great friends, and more than once Lavender had given a passing thought to the circumstances which had brought about Sir John Trench’s marriage, and more than once wondered by what means the stately lady who ruled over his house in Chesham Place had come to be Sir John Trench’s wife. “A splendid wife,” he said to himself, as he laid his head upon his pillow, “a splendid wife, a wonderful figure-head, a great help-meet ; and yet I have often wondered how she came to touch Sir John Trench’s susceptible Irish heart. So, after all, there was a little romance ! The old story, I

have no doubt—want of money. It curses every one some time or other.”

The following morning, before ten o'clock, Kit Malinder received a telegram. It said: “Come to my chambers at 12.30.—Trench.”

She read it with a beating heart. So he had found something after all; his influence had not counted for nothing. He had told her to wait two days, and here, in one, was a summons to go to him. Unless he had news for her he would never have summoned her like that. She was still young enough—and countrified enough—to regard a telegram with awe. She read it at least fifty times before the hour came at which she was to go down and present herself at Sir John's chambers.

“You have found something for me?” she breathed rather than spoke, as she was shown into his private room.

Sir John put on a deprecating air.

“Oh, my dear child, that is jumping a little too far ahead! I cannot say that I have found something for you; things are not done so quickly as that. I saw my friend Everard—Frederick Everard, the manager of the Frivolity—yesterday, and failing all else he will take you on at a guinea a week as an understudy.”

“Should I ever have the chance of playing?”

“You might—you might not. But a little later in the day I chanced to run against Lavender——”

“Lavender—the actor?”

“Yes, the actor. And I told him about you—I think I may say, my dear child, that I interested him in you—and he told me to send you to see him at one o'clock.”

Her eyes sought the marble timepiece on the crowded mantelshelf. “One o'clock—you mean now?” and she pointed a trembling finger at the dial with as much apprehension as if she were going to a dentist to have every tooth in her head extracted.

Sir John laughed and patted her shoulder.

"Lavender is the kindest man in the world," he said ; "don't go with any fear of him, or you won't make a good impression, and first impressions, my dear child, as you know, are everything."

"I can't help being frightened," she said, her voice trembling.

"Which is sheer nonsense. I have written you a letter just to introduce you, and you must try and overcome any fears. Remember, you are going into a profession—or you are trying to go into a profession—which knows no fear. From the moment that you set your foot towards the stage you must put aside every personal qualm, dread, fear, apprehension, nervousness ; from the moment that you accept a farthing you will no longer be Kit Mallinder, you will be the servant of the great British public. Now, my dear child, I am going to give you a glass of old port and a biscuit."

"No, no !" She put up her hand instantly.

"It will be good for you."

"No, no ; I will not take it, Sir John. I shall do no good by beginning my career with Dutch courage."

He brought his hand down hard upon her shoulder. "You are a brave little girl," he said, "and I am glad that I took you in hand to help you. Keep up that spirit, my dear child ; impress Lavender as you have impressed me, and there will be no holding you !"

Yet, in spite of her brave words, it was with a very quaking heart that she passed down the shabby stairs and found herself once more in the bustling street. The sickly winter sun was shining brightly, if fitfully ; a clock overhead chimed the quarter before the hour. A cab or a 'bus would bring her to the great theatre over which Lavender presided too soon ; if she walked she would arrive there just in time for her appointment without the sickening anxiety of waiting any length of time. So she

turned her face westward, and set off at a smart pace along the greasy and crowded pavement. It still wanted three minutes to the hour when she turned in at the entrance to the great theatre. The gentleman in charge of the box-office bade her, kindly enough, go to the stage-door.

"I can't let you through this way," he said. "If you go outside and go round the first turn to the left you will see the door just along the street. The doorkeeper there will take you straight to Mr. Lavender, as you have an appointment."

With a little difficulty she discovered the stage-door, the doorkeeper of which was more suspicious than the gentleman in the box-office had been.

"You are quite sure that you have an appointment with Mr. Lavender?" he asked, rather gruffly.

"I am quite sure," said Kit, trying hard to be valiant, and succeeding very badly.

"Well, if you will wait here a minute I will inquire," said the man.

Without further ado he shut the door to, leaving Kit in the lobby. An irresistible desire to cry came over her, but she manfully choked down the tears, and tried to assure herself that he was but doing his duty and carrying out his orders. Still, it was discouraging to be left in the lobby, to have the door almost shut in her face by a man of that kind. It was her first distinct rebuff, and, as all the world knows, rebuffs, until you become used to them, are mighty unpleasant to bear.

Then the door opened again and the man, with more civility, told her that it was all right, and that if she would step this way Mr. Lavender would see her.

CHAPTER VI

A BEGINNING

KIT's guide led her along a dark and narrow passage.

"There's a step up, miss," he said, just when the gloom was at its thickest.

"Thank you," said Kit.

Then he stopped abruptly, and thumped upon a door. A voice bade him enter, and the next moment the girl was in the great actor's presence. She had only seen him once or twice on the stage, but she was sufficiently familiar with his person to recognise him as he sat at a large table in the centre of the room, the cold wintry light from the window streaming full upon his face.

He pushed back his chair and rose.

"How do you do?" he said, looking at her with a curiously searching gaze. "Sit down. You are Sir John Trench's friend?"

"Yes," faltered Kit.

The actor seated himself in the same chair from which he had risen, and smoothed his cheek from the temple downward with the middle finger of his left hand.

"And you want to go on the stage?" he said.

"Yes," said Kit.

"Do you know anything about it?"

"Not of the real stage," she answered.

"Ah! You've—you've played a little in amateur theatricals at home in your village or in your own town?"

"Yes." She felt as if this ascetic-looking actor was reading her very soul to its inmost thoughts.

"You—you—you think you have some talent for acting?"

"I know that I have," she said, vehemently.

"So!" He looked at her hard, changing the curious smoothing movement of his middle finger from his cheek to his chin. "You are prepared to work?"

"As hard as you like."

"Ah! You don't expect to keep a brougham the first few months you are at work?"

"I am afraid that I don't expect ever to keep a brougham," she said, with a laugh.

"Ah! Can you recite?"

"I never tried."

"Don't you like recitations?"

"No—not other people's."

"Ah! Can you read aloud?"

"Of course I can."

"My dear child," said Lavender, suddenly changing his position, and tapping the tips of his fingers together.

"My dear child, there is no 'of course' about it! Ninety-nine people out of a hundred—oh, nine hundred and ninety-nine out of a thousand—who think that they can read aloud cannot read—do not understand how to read—do not even know the first elements of reading. See," stretching out a hand, and taking a volume from the table, "read that."

"From the beginning?"

She looked at him.

"Yes. Do you know the poem?"

"Yes. I know it," said Kit.

"Then you will be the better able to let me judge. Go and stand over there and repeat it."

Fortunately for her she did not hesitate. She put down her muff, walked to the spot to which he had pointed, and began,—

'There was a sound of revelry by night.'

"That will do," said Lavender; "you can read, at

least you can speak, which is more to our purpose. So you want to go on the stage, to become an actress? It is a great profession. My old friend, Sir John Trench, tells me that you are engaged to be married."

"Did he tell you that?"

"He did ; and he was right to tell me. There should be no secrets between a manager and his company."

"Oh, there is no secret," said Kit.

"All the better. But you are engaged to be married, and I think Sir John told me that the gentleman is——"

"He is a soldier," said the girl, with a certain uplifting of her head, indicative of pride in her lover.

"Well, that is a drawback—that is a detriment. You will find that your engagement will, in some senses, stand in your light. Does he know——?"

"He has given me a perfectly free hand, Mr. Lavender. I am to do as I like."

"I see. And how soon do you expect to be married?"

"Oh, not for years and years. He goes to India next year ; he will be out there at least four years before he has any chance of returning. By that time, if there is anything in me, and I know that there is, I shall have made my way, or I shall be glad to give up all idea of doing anything on the stage."

"But, practically, you are prepared to give yourself entirely up to it ; to work, to work honestly ; to abjure tea-parties and suchlike things—for the stage is a hard mistress. Those who would make their mark must live by line and rule, must work and study, must watch all they eat and drink, must live for their profession, and for their profession alone. The old days, when the stage was a sort of fairy-land, when lovely ladies walked on and took all hearts by storm, are gone by for ever—if they ever existed ; the actor of to-day who would succeed must not only be an actor but a student. It is a hard life, it is an engrossing life, and a wearing life, but it is worth it. It is

a glorious profession, that of dramatic art. If you are prepared to work, to give your life to it, I will give you a beginning, for the sake of Sir John Trench, my very good and dear friend. But I must have your loyal promise, to begin with, that there shall be no frivolity, no striving to serve two masters ; that, with the exception of your natural interest in your *fiancé*, you will devote yourself body and soul to your work."

She sprang to her feet, and flung out her hand towards him.

"There's my hand on it," she said. "You could not have a pupil more in earnest than I. I know nothing, I come to you wholly ignorant, excepting with that feeling that it is here"—putting her hands upon her breast—"here ; and if you help me now I will try to serve you, and to do the work you give me honestly and with all my heart."

When two people have come to an understanding the details of the business arrangements are easily planned. Mr. Lavender agreed that Kit should begin her work as a member of his company in a week's time, which, as he explained, would give her ample opportunity to settle herself in London, and to transfer herself and her belongings from Little Gracethorpe Rectory. He told her that her salary would begin at three guineas a week. To Kit it seemed untold wealth, and she almost demurred at his making the sum so large. He put her objections on one side with a very dictatorial wave of the hand.

"You will find it little enough ; living in London is not the same as living in a country village. Let Mr. Meridew have your address as soon as you are settled, and he will give you instructions what time to be here."

She felt herself dismissed, but ere she left the room she caught his hand impulsively in hers.

"Oh, Mr. Lavender," she said, "you have done this for Sir John, but some day you will be glad that you have

done it for me. I may be a dead failure as an actress, but I will not be a dead failure as a worker. At least you shall have the satisfaction of knowing that Sir John did not use his interest for somebody who was worthless."

"There, there, there," said the great actor, kindly. He patted her shoulder and bade her good-bye in a tone which told her plainly that deeds and not words must be her future thanks.

When she left the Coliseum she jumped into the first cab that she saw, and drove straight back to Sir John Trench's chambers. Sir John was just crossing the court on his way to lunch.

"Well?" he asked, as they met.

"Well," she replied. "Oh, he was so kind. He has promised me a place; he is going to take me on. I am to begin on Monday week, and I am to have three guineas a week for the present."

"That is very good," said Sir John, who had barely expected that his friend would be able to find a corner.

"And is he going to give you work to do?"

"Yes, I am to have small things; and oh, Sir John, I am so happy—oh, I am so happy—nobody knows how happy I am! I will work, I will show you what I can do! Oh, think of the chance of starting at the Coliseum! Why, I might have fagged for ten years and not have got such a chance as that! Why, it is beginning at the top."

"Lavender will take care you don't begin at the top, my dear child," said Sir John, more soberly. "But let us go and have lunch. I suppose you are not so elated as to have forgotten that you have to eat?"

"I had forgotten all about it; I had forgotten all about lunch. I suppose it is lunch time!"

"I should think it is!" said Sir John. "I am most frightfully hungry. Come, we will go and have lunch

together, and we will drink a bumper together to the future member of the Coliseum company."

As they sat over their lunch, Sir John asked her several very important questions.

"Now tell me," he said, "where are you going to live? Because that, in itself, is a very important thing in London, especially for a young girl, as you are. You know, I want you to be a great success; I don't want you to grub on living anyhow and anyway, that is not the kind of thing that pays. You must live well, live comfortably, live eminently respectably, or else this young man of yours will be seeking my blood. I must see if I can get my lady to take you about a little, and put you in the way of knowing the right people."

"But I have promised Mr. Lavender that I won't go about. He says that parties and the stage cannot amalgamate, cannot get along together."

"Tut, tut, child! There are parties and parties. There are hundreds of little shows in London at which it would do you positive harm to be seen; you don't want, and Lavender doesn't want you, to be the heroine of Brixton tea fights and West Kensington At Home days; but there are some houses where it is good for any workers in art to be seen occasionally. It is such houses as these to which Lady Trench will take you—at least I think she will. That, however, will come all in good time. I shall ask my wife to be your friend in London, so that you may have some woman of the world, who knows the world, on whom you may rely for advice or for protection. Meantime, the most important question is—where are you going to live?—how are you going to live?"

"I must find lodgings," said she, in a tone of conviction.

Sir John looked more than doubtful.

"Lodgings, at your age, lodgings! I don't like the idea, my little friend. Lodging alone means nobody to

“speak to when your work is done ; it means having your meals anyhow ; it means having nobody excepting a landlady at the back of you. I think you will find lodgings a dead failure. Good lodgings, within walking distance of the theatre, you cannot get under at least thirty shillings a week. What have you left? You will take all your economy out of your food. Don't think of lodgings. Besides, it would not do, for many reasons.”

“But where am I to go?” she exclaimed.

“You must find some family with whom you can live, or some boarding-house.”

“Why not the house where I am staying now? Mrs. Johnson knew auntie, and auntie had the greatest respect for her. She always declared she was a most worthy person ; she had been there for years. I should be all right with her.”

“That sounds better,” said Sir John. “And she is in Charlotte Street, isn't she?”

“Yes ; she's in Charlotte Street.”

“Well, before you make any arrangements, find out what she would take you for as a permanent boarder. Only, be sure to make your arrangements so as to have a dinner specially cooked for you if the needs of the theatre require it at a certain time.”

“But I shouldn't want a whole dinner cooked for myself!”

“My dear child, I presume Mrs. Johnson has dinner at seven or eight o'clock. Seven o'clock dinner will never do for an actress who has to be on the stage at eight. You will require to have your dinner at five, or at six o'clock at the latest. But Mrs. Johnson, if she is a person who knows anything of theatres, will understand exactly how you are placed in that respect. Failing this good woman, whom you know, I would advise you to go to her on your return to town until you do find precisely the proper place. Lady Trench, I am sure,

would tell you whether you were doing right or wrong. I suppose you are going back to Little Gracethorpe almost immediately?"

"Oh, yes, I shall go back to-morrow, pack up all my things, and—and——"

"And face the music," said Sir John.

She flushed up vividly.

"Perhaps they may mind a little—I don't think that they will," she said, simply.

"They'll mind, right enough," said Sir John, with conviction in his tones, "especially our good friend Mrs. Alison."

Still, the girl went back to Little Gracethorpe with a brave heart. She had met with success, she had not been rebuffed on all hands as most girls in story-books are when they try to go on the stage. In story-books, theatrical managers have a vast capacity for love-making, which seems to bubble up at all times and in all seasons; in story-books, heroines who find themselves in Kit's position have many and strange adventures. She had had none. She had met with kindness, and her way had been smoothed so that it remained only for her to show whether there was anything in her or not. Of course, this was due to the influence of Sir John Trench, and Kit's heart swelled, as she thought of him, with a gratitude as beautiful as such gratitude is rare.

That evening after dinner she had a long confidential talk with Mrs. Johnson, the mistress of the house in which she was staying.

"My dear Miss Mallinder," said that lady, "once you get into lodgings of your own you will be wretched; never a soul to speak to except the servant that waits upon you—and they're never up to much. Your dinner would degenerate into a toasted sausage or a kipper, and in about six months you would be heart-broken. You had far better stop with me."

“Yes, but can I afford to pay as much as you would charge me, Mrs. Johnson?” said Kit.

“Well, now, let me see. If I gave you that nice little room you have now, your breakfast and your lunch, something in place of your dinner when you have to go to the theatre, and a fire in your bedroom—for you must have some place where you can study, that stands to common sense—inclusive two pounds a week. Now, would that break you?”

“No, I don’t think that would break me, Mrs. Johnson,” said Kit.

“And, mind, I will feed you well. You shall not lose for not being able to eat your dinner at the same time as the other boarders, that I promise you, my dear. I was that fond of your poor aunt that I’d do well by her niece, even if I wouldn’t do it for your own sake. You’d be safe with me; you know my house, you know what the cooking is, and, if there’s anything the matter, you know what I am, Miss Mallinder. I always say it’s a great thing for a young lady—ay, and for a young gentleman, too—when they can go to those in London that they can trust. And take my advice, Miss Mallinder, don’t you mix yourself up too much with the other boarders. They are all very nice—as nice a set as I could wish to receive into my house—but keep yourself a little to yourself. If once they find out you’re at the Coliseum, they’ll always be worrying you for orders, or for tickets, or wanting you to go here and there with them. The young ladies will be hanging on to your skirts, and the young gentlemen will be wanting to hang on to yourself. Take my advice—keep yourself to yourself; it’s far the best that you can do. Why, when Miss Awdrie was here——”

“Miss Awdrie? You don’t mean it!”

“Yes, Miss Awdrie lived with me for eight years—right until the time she went into housekeeping for herself, and I always gave her the same advice: ‘Keep

yourself to yourself while you're in the house, and then when you leave it there's no need to shake off those that you don't want to know, and that won't do you any good.' "

And so it was with the details of her future life all cut and dried that Kit Mallinder went back to little Grace-thorpe Rectory. The two girls came to the station to meet her ; the Archdeacon was hovering about the door-step, and Mrs. Alison, still just a little distant in manner, was sitting by the drawing-room fire.

"A cup of tea, Kit?" she asked, again presenting the edge of her cheek for the child's greeting.

"Thank you, Mrs. Alison, thank you very much. Yes, it is cold," said Kit.

Mrs. Alison looked at her. The girl was changed. She was devoured with curiosity, but she would not deign to ask a question. The girls, however, were not so reticent.

"Well, Kit, and what has happened to you?" said the elder of the twain.

"Oh, Violet," answered Kit, enthusiastically, "such things have happened to me!"

"Nothing unpleasant, I hope," said Mrs. Alison, in a lugubrious tone.

"Unpleasant, Mrs. Alison? Not in the least. Why, what should happen to me unpleasant?"

"When young girls go running off to London by themselves——" Mrs. Alison began.

"Oh, but I was with people I knew all the time. Nothing could happen to me unpleasant in Mrs. Johnson's house. If anybody there had uttered so much as a wrong word to me, why, she would have raised the very roof. She thought the world of auntie. And as for Sir John Trench, why, he was as good as gold to me."

"Sir John Trench!" echoed the Archdeacon's wife, in tones of genuine amazement.

"Yes, I went to see Sir John Trench. He was auntie's greatest friend, and I knew that he would help me to plan out what I wanted. I felt that he would—and he did."

"And when did you know Sir John Trench?"

"Always, Mrs. Alison. Whenever auntie and I went to London we always dined with him, and we always went to the theatre with him. I tell you, he was one of auntie's greatest friends. Did she never speak of him to you?"

"Never," said Mrs. Alison, with emphasis.

"Ah!" A sudden flood of understanding came into the girl's mind. So that was the reason that Sir John had been so willing to befriend her! There had been a friendship between her aunt and the great Queen's Counsel of more than ordinary warmth. Now she understood, by the curious clairvoyance which in women we call intuition, now she understood why she had never seen Lady Trench, why he had spoken with a certain doubtfulness as to whether Lady Trench would help her and befriend her or not. So the little delicate rose-leaf aunt, who had once been punished for whistling, had been Sir John Trench's life romance! It was curious. She wondered that she had never thought of it before. It was strange.

"And what," broke in the voice of the Archdeacon's wife, "and what, Kit, is it that Sir John Trench is going to help you to do?"

Kit drew a long breath.

"I am going on the stage," she said.

CHAPTER VII

FACING THE MUSIC

WHEN Kit Mallinder, in reply to her future mother-in-law's question, uttered those portentous words, "I am going on the stage," a dead silence fell upon the group gathered together in the Rectory drawing-room. The two Alison girls drew their breath sharply as when one expects a quickly-coming storm; the Archdeacon opened his mouth to speak, and then shut it again as one who thought better of his intention; it was Mrs. Alison who at last broke the silence.

"I do not think," she said, in a clear, cutting voice, "that I understood you aright."

Kit raised her eyes and looked the lady full in the face.

"I said that I am going on the stage, Mrs. Alison," she repeated, quietly.

"Did I understand that you said that?"

"Yes."

"You have the intention of going on the stage?"

"Yes."

"Of disgracing us?"

"No, Mrs. Alison, never, I hope, to disgrace you."

"It is the same thing; one act implies the other. You—my son's *fiancée*—to think, speak, suggest, arrange to go on the stage! You will have to give it up."

"I shall certainly not do that."

"I insist upon it."

"You have no right to insist."

"I have the right as Gregory's mother."

"No, I do not acknowledge that right. I have Gregory's consent for what I am doing."

“Gregory’s consent to go on the stage !”

“I have Gregory’s consent to do as I choose.”

“I absolutely forbid it.”

“You have no power, no right, to forbid anything I do. It is for Gregory to decide ; it is not for you,” said Kit, in a voice which showed clearly that her patience would not hold out much longer.

“Well, Kit, I do not understand the young ladies of the present day ; but all I can say is that you choose between this idea and me. If you wish to continue on terms of any kind with me, you will give up this preposterous idea at once.”

“I cannot give it up,” said Kit.

“I would never consent to receive an actress as my son’s wife.”

“Mrs. Alison,” said Kit, “I think you had better talk that question over with Gregory. For the present, I am your guest, and it would be better not to discuss it. I must ask you to allow me to remain here for a few hours while I pack my belongings ; I should not like to go out of your house as if I were a servant dismissed for theft.”

“It is not in the least necessary that you should do that,” said the Archdeacon, speaking for the first time.

“Do you put the question on one side until Kit leaves us. I do not consider, my dear Arabella, that it is hospitable to speak to your guest in such a tone.”

“My guest—that child !” exclaimed Mrs. Alison.

“That is beside the question. It is my wish, if you please, that nothing more be said to Kit on the subject to-night. Let her make her arrangements in peace and amity.”

Kit got up rather unsteadily. She looked very frail and young in her deep mourning attire, and there was a suspicious dewiness about her grey eyes, a suspicious quivering about the corners of her charming mouth.

“Mr. Archdeacon,” she said, “you have always been most kind to me ; I shall never forget what you say now. To-morrow I will leave, because I should not like Gregory to feel that I had made any dissensions in the family—especially with his mother. Please do not let us discuss the question to-night ; Mrs. Alison can better speak her mind when I am not her guest. If you will excuse me I will go to my room.”

She left the room, and the two girls turned and followed her.

“My dear Arabella,” said the Archdeacon, “I hope that you feel, for once in your life, properly snubbed. Why could you not let the child alone with her idea until she had sufficiently recovered her fatigue, and then have got Gregory to talk to her and to talk her out of this attitude? As it is now, he will stand by her. She will tell him, and the girls will tell him, how you flew at the poor little soul who was your guest, and he will stand by her as sure as I am Archdeacon Alison.”

“My dear Freddy,” said Mrs. Alison, indignantly, “the idea of a child like that—a baby like that—setting herself up against me ! I never heard of such a thing in the whole course of my life.”

“But there is no particular reason why she shouldn’t set herself up against you ; it is her affair.”

“But she is engaged to my son.”

“Well, my dear, if your son doesn’t mind it is no use you interfering. I see no such great harm in the child following the stage as a profession. She has marked talent ; she has a good friend in Sir John Trench—a very powerful friend ; and if she has also his wife’s countenance, she will do extremely well.”

“The idea !” fumed Mrs. Alison, indignantly, “the idea of you talking about our son’s wife having anybody’s countenance. Countenance, indeed !”

“A very necessary thing for a girl alone in London,”

said the Archdeacon, who, when he did speak, was not easily turned from his purpose.

“Of course, I might have expected that you would take sides against me !” said Mrs. Alison, with an extremely ruffled demeanour.

“It is not taking sides, my dear Arabella. The child is honestly doing her best ; Gregory cannot marry her at present, and I consider that honest effort should always be encouraged as much as possible.”

“The stage !” fumed Mrs. Alison.

“Well, the stage may be a great medium for good. I presume that the child does not intend to appear in tights, or in any plays to which we should not take our daughters. I see no harm myself in that form of art, any more than I see harm in my going into the pulpit and preaching a sermon. If I preach a sermon to a good end, I am doing a good work ; if an actor or an actress is preaching a different kind of sermon to a good end, that actor or actress is also doing a good work ; and it is very possible that the work of the stage may be as blessed, or more blessed, than the work of the pulpit.”

“I never thought,” said Mrs. Alison, indignantly, “to hear such sophistry fall from your lips, Freddy. I have wondered sometimes where all your new-fangled notions would lead you—I little thought to the detriment of your own family circle !”

“My dear, my dear, don’t talk arrant nonsense,” said the Archdeacon.

“If your poor mother could think of her grandson’s wife——” Mrs. Alison began.

“Well, my dear, well, you have to consider the times in which we live. You know, my dear, there are still a great many people living who think it is a sin to read a novel. They think that because an effort of the imagination is only an effort of the imagination—a romance—it is therefore necessarily a lie. But we cannot all believe

that a pleasant novel is a lie ; we are not all narrow-minded enough to believe that mere make-believe must be intended to deceive."

"It is beside the question," said Mrs. Alison, with a grandiose air.

"It is analogous," said the Archdeacon. "I see no difference between a play of Shakspeare given in my school-room for the benefit of parochial charities, and a play by a modern playwright given in a London theatre. Probably the modern play will be less coarse, and the moral may be even more strong."

"You will advocate music-halls next," said Mrs. Alison, loftily.

"I went to a music-hall the last time I was in London," said the Archdeacon. "I saw nothing to bring a blush to my cheek. In all such places vice is apparent, and I am afraid, my dear Arabella, until the millennium be upon us, that vice will continue to walk rampant in our very midst. And, indeed, for my own part, I think it will be a very bad thing when we do not know vice by sight."

Mrs. Alison drew herself up with a shudder.

"Whether you," she said at last, in a scared voice, "have taken leave of your senses or not, I cannot tell ; but never did I think that I should live to hear such sentiments come from the mouth of my husband. A good thing to know vice by sight !"

"Yes, my dear ; for when vice has so aped the garments of respectability that we cannot tell t'other from which, so assuredly will the downfall of the nation have begun. I believe that I am right in saying that the most insidious disease in the world is leprosy ; and leprosy, in its first stages, is not easy to recognise. While we can look the devil in the face we can guard ourselves against him, but when the devil takes the form of——"

"Our daughter-in-law," put in Mrs. Alison, in a cutting voice.

“My dear Arabella ; my dear, pray do not let such an idea find place within your mind, even for a moment. The child has Sir John Trench’s counsel and advice, his influence, and his assistance. We do not know yet what plans she has made ; you stopped her from telling you everything, as she was prepared to do. Do not condemn her until you know where she is going, what she is going to do, and how she is going to do it. Remember, my dear Arabella, that the first novels were written under Divine inspiration.”

“We are not talking of novels, but of plays and play-acting,” said Mrs. Alison, breaking in upon her husband’s mild eloquence. “I like a good play as well as anybody, and, provided that the theatre is well conducted, I give it the seal of my approval. But I am not willing to know personally those persons who provide that amusement for me, and I am still less willing that my son’s wife should be one of them. It does not matter to me whether Shakspeare was a great man or a small man ; whether he got his ideas out of his inner consciousness, or from Lord Bacon, or from the plays of Boccaccio ; those questions do not trouble me. But my social position is such that it is abhorrent to me that I should be connected, ever so remotely, with a person earning money in that way. The actor whom I see when I pay my money to go to the theatre is no more to me than the butcher who kills the meat that I eat for my dinner. In their own way they may be respectable, even worthy, persons. But their way is not my way, and I object to its becoming so. My butcher marries my housemaid ; I make her a wedding present, and I consider it a very nice and suitable marriage. I don’t know who actors marry, but I object to my son marrying an actress. I may be wrong-headed, and unreasonable, and narrow-minded, or anything else you like, but those are my sentiments, and I shall not swerve from them.”

“Well, well, well, my dear,” said the Archdeacon, “you shall think as you like ; but for the little time that the child will be with us, I beg that you will not say too much on the subject. I have never yet believed in opposition as the best way of preventing an undesirable consummation ; opposition does but fan the flame which otherwise might die of sheer inanition.”

The direct result of the Archdeacon’s interference was that there was at least outward peace during the rest of Kit’s stay at the Rectory. Mrs. Alison attempted no further direct interference with her son’s *fiancée*, but contented herself with writing to Gregory a full account of all that had happened, and of all that was in her mind, expounding her views, and explaining them with a clearness which would, she believed, settle the matter once for all.

The direct result of this letter was that two days later, just after Kit had said good-bye to Little Gracethorpe and the Rectory, as it seemed for ever, Mrs. Alison received a telegram from Gregory : “Arrive three o’clock. Ten days’ leave.” The cob and the dog-cart went to the station to meet him. Gregory asked no questions of the groom who drove the cart, and when he reached the Rectory, his mother was the only member of the family who was there to receive him.

“My dear boy,” she exclaimed, “your father was so grieved to be out, but he had an important meeting which he could not get off. The girls are gone over to tea at Lady Hawker’s.”

“And Kit with them, of course.”

Mrs. Alison drew her son out of the hall, and out of the reach of the parlour-maid’s ears, into the long, low drawing-room.

“Tea for Mr. Gregory at once, Margaret.”

“Dear boy,” said she, shutting the door, “she has gone.”

"Gone to Lady Hawker's?" said Gregory.

"My dear boy, gone—gone to London."

"You have let her go!"

"I could not prevent it. She is so changed, Gregory, my dear boy; really I hardly knew the child. Your father would not allow me to speak, and the two days that she has been home passed in a sort of stilted all-round politeness, such as made me feel extremely ill."

"But is it all settled that she shall go on the stage?"

"That I cannot tell you. They shut me up when I expressed my views on the subject—when I said anything. I don't even know where she is going, whether she has any settled plan, or whether the whole thing is only a mad idea; but, Gregory, you must stop it."

"Oh, yes, mother, of course I will stop it," he said, easily. "I think you worry yourself too much. Kit is young; she thinks that it is a grand thing to go on the stage; she does not realise, poor child, all the heart-break and all the disappointment that she must of necessity meet with. Dear mother, you were not too hard with her?"

"I—I spoke my mind," said Mrs. Alison, reddening a little as she thought how very plainly she had spoken her mind. "I disapproved of the scheme, and I did not disguise my feelings. But you know, Gregory, my dear boy, although Kit has not a penny, I offered, for your sake, that she should be as one of my own daughters until you could be married."

"You did that, mother?"

"Yes, I did that. But this mad, this wild-goose idea of going on the stage! Oh, it must be stopped! It is impossible that a lady, your future wife, my future daughter-in-law, could dream of anything so preposterous! And she said that she had your consent!"

"Well, in a measure she had my consent," said he. "I told her that she should do exactly as she liked. As

to going on the stage, that was never mentioned between us ; that idea never occurred to me."

"I see. She told me that she had your positive consent."

"To doing as she liked—yes ; not my definite consent to going on the stage."

"But you can never consent to such a thing !"

"I don't like the idea," said Gregory, looking at his mother ; "but, of course, you know, mother dear, there is going on the stage and going on the stage. To have a wife who had been going about in tights at the beck and call of all the mashers in London would certainly not please me ; but there are plenty of actresses in London who are every bit as good and every bit as swagger as my own sisters, against whom there has never been a breath—who are ladies in every sense of the word. There is no doubt that Kit is exceptionally gifted in that way, and I do not think that it is right to hide talent under a bushel. I cannot think that Kit, such a perfect little lady as she is, would wish to do anything that would reflect upon her in any derogatory sense."

"Then you do practically give your consent?" said Mrs. Alison, in a hardened voice.

"Not at all. I take it as a serious matter, and my coming here shows that I do so."

"An actress !" cried Mrs. Alison.

"Well, it depends on the actress, and on the theatre, and on—on everything, mother. Of course, there are girls who go round in pantomime, who, when they are in the provinces, literally live in barracks, girls who lead disreputable lives, who are ladies neither by birth, by education, nor by position. But it is rough on a woman like Mary Warrender to class her with such people as these. Now, Lavender would never allow anything disreputable in his theatre, nor, indeed, would any of the great London managers. You have an idea, mother,

that because a woman is on the stage she is lost to all sense of propriety and of respectability. But it is not so. I have more than once met Mary Warrender at a party, when my hostess would have looked at me from head to foot for my impertinence if I had asked to be introduced to her."

"What !"

"Yes, I mean it. I have seen Mary Warrender received at a house, of whose respectability and of whose position there had never been the smallest question, as if she were royalty itself."

"But Mary Warrender has great genius," said Mrs. Alison, in a cutting tone.

"Ah, yes ; so Kit may have. I have an open mind about her."

"And you intend to allow this outrageous arrangement to go on?"

"I will go to London to-morrow ; indeed, I think I should be wiser if I went to-night," returned Gregory, "and I will hear all that Kit has to say on the subject ; indeed, she wrote to me—I had her letter by the same post as yours—telling me that she had made her arrangements, and that they were displeasing to you, and asking me to go up to town to see her as soon as I could spare a few hours, in order that she might lay all her plans before me, and explain everything that she had done, to my satisfaction."

"She asked you to go up to London to see her alone?"

"And why not?" said Gregory, turning indignantly upon his mother. "Kit has known me all her life ; we propose to pass the rest of our lives together. Don't let me think, mother, that you can trust me so little that I cannot go to see my own affianced wife for a few hours without evil being thought of us. My dear little girl never had such an unholy thought in her mind, and I confess that it has come into mine for the first time from

you. I will dine here, and go on by the nine o'clock train ; then I shall be able to hear all that she has to tell me before her arrangements are too definitely fixed for alteration."

CHAPTER VIII

HER OWN WAY

IN vain did Mrs. Alison urge her son to abide the night at Little Gracethorpe Rectory. He had made up his mind to go to London by the nine o'clock train, and no argument served to change him from that decision. He found an opportunity of sounding his sisters on the subject of Kit's doings, but neither of them had anything to tell.

"Of course, mother went for her like a thousand of bricks," said Violet, "and daddy simply insisted that she was to be let alone, and everything was exceedingly uncomfortable and disagreeable during the few hours that she was here. Connie and I did our best to get all the news there was to tell out of her, but Kit was as close as wax. All she would say was that she had come down prepared to tell mother everything; that mother had shut her up and snubbed her, and that she would not say another word until she had seen you."

"Do you think she was wretched about it?"

"Wretched, poor little thing. Why, of course she was. You know what mother is when she is upset and on the sarcastic tack. Mother was cuttingly civil, and poor little Kit cried every time she got into her bedroom, and all the time she was packing, and father was more paternal and more preachy than usual, and, altogether, we never went through such a two days in our lives—did we, Connie?"

"Never !" said Connie. "Oh, it was dreadful. All

she kept saying was, 'You won't desert me, will you? You won't give me up?' And, of course, Vi and I promised on our sacred word of honour that we never would give her up. I think it comforted her a little, but she was perfectly heart-broken at the turn affairs had taken. She wouldn't go and say good-bye to anybody in the village, and of course mother wouldn't tell anybody what had happened ; she only pursed up her lips, and said that Kit was a wilful girl, and must go her own way. She—oh, you know the kind of thing, Greg—talked about want of experience, old heads on young shoulders, and all the preachiness that mother does go on with sometimes. Altogether, we were quite pleased when Kit had gone."

"You know her address?"

"Oh, yes, she is at Mrs. Johnson's."

"Oh ! where she told me she was going."

"Yes. She told us that Mrs. Johnson had been most awfully kind to her."

"And Sir John Trench, too," put in Violet.

"He's married?" asked Gregory, a sudden suspicion forming itself in his mind.

"Oh, yes ! very much married ; and he has promised Kit that his wife will befriend her in more ways than one. Beyond that we don't know a thing. I hear mother coming."

The certainty that there was no further information to be had at Little Gracethorpe only made Gregory Alison the more determined to go to London by the nine o'clock train, and not all the arguments of his mother could change him from that decision. Accordingly, Gregory left the Rectory and departed for London, and early the following morning, that is to say, soon after ten o'clock, he presented himself at the house in Charlotte Street which was presided over by Miss Whitaker's worthy old friend, Mrs. Johnson.

Kit received him in the large drawing-room. At that hour it was untenanted, the rest of Mrs. Johnson's boarders having either departed on their several occupations and affairs, or else still remaining in their own rooms. In all her life Kit had never felt her heart go out with such a gush as to this well-grown, long, lithe, handsome young man. In comparison with the men whom she had been seeing during the past few days he looked so big and handsome, so well-grown, so well set-up, he looked such a man—as, indeed, he was. He told her how his mother had written to him, and how he had been lucky enough to get a few days' leave, and had gone straight home to Little Gracethorpe.

“Only to find you flown,” he went on.

“Only to find that I had been turned out, Greg,” she said, trying hard to speak brightly.

“Oh! come, not so bad as that. The poor mother was a bit upset—you can't wonder at it. Living all her life in Little Gracethorpe, of course, her ideas are not as wide as the ideas of people who live in a larger centre.”

“I lived in Little Gracethorpe all my life, Greg,” she said, simply.

“Yes, my dear, but you are young; you have always the possibilities of life before you. A woman in my mother's position has all her ideas set firm; they've been cut and dried for years and years, until they have become a part of herself. But tell me everything. I am waiting to hear all your news.”

So, without further ado, she told him everything which had been stopped at the fountain-head on the night of her return to Little Gracethorpe.

“And Lavender has promised you an engagement?” he said, incredulously.

“Yes; it is wonderful, is it not?”

“My dear child, indeed it is wonderful. I believe that there are hundreds of women, clever women, who

would pay huge premiums if they could only get into Lavender's company. It is through Sir John Trench, of course?"

"Oh, yes! But, Greg, you wouldn't have me refuse such a chance?"

"Not if you have set your heart upon trying what you can do on the stage; most decidedly not."

"Your mother spoke of it as such a disgrace."

"Ah, well, she will think otherwise of you by-and-by. You see, you didn't tell her that you had been lucky enough to get with Lavender."

"I didn't tell her, Greg, because she wouldn't hear anything that I had to say. She shut me up and snubbed me till I felt more like bursting out crying than anything else. I would have told her—I meant to tell her. Why should I keep anything back from any of you?"

"No, no; exactly."

"And you will stand by me, Greg?"

"Of course I will stand by you. Why, there may come a day when I shall be only too proud to be known as Miss Mallinder's husband. I shall always be proud to be Kit's husband, that goes without saying."

"Then you don't intend to give me up?"

"To give you up!" he echoed. "Why, I could as soon give up myself—I could easier give up my life. Dearest child, when one is genuinely and honestly in love, one does not give up one's sweetheart because she happens to feel that she has a soul and a gift above the ordinary run of women. What preposterous question will you ask next?"

She gave a little sigh of extreme contentment.

"Ah, well, one never knows! Your mother seemed so positive, so certain that you would disapprove."

"It was not my mother who asked you to marry me, Kit."

“No, no, I didn’t mean that.”

“It was not my mother, perhaps, who would have chosen you for my wife. It was I,” triumphantly, “I alone—all my own doing! Well, so I, all of my own doing, tell you that I shall never, never, never want to give you up; that, whatever you do, you will always be the same Kit to me, always the same sweetheart, always the same bewitching and perfect little person! So, will that start you on your new life in contentment?”

She felt herself grow big and brave all at once.

And then Gregory, on his side, made a demand upon her.

“I want you,” he said, “now—before you begin, before you take up this profession at all—to make me a promise.”

“And that is——?”

“Well, that when you have had a fair trial at it, if you find you do not succeed as you hope to do, you will drop it. If the worst comes to the worst we can live very comfortably in India on our pay and my allowance. You have a year and a half in which to prove yourself. If you are going to do anything at all you will have done it by then, you will at least show that you are on the right track. If you do not succeed—though, mind, I think you will—and you go hanging on, hoping against hope, and trying to do the impossible, you will make yourself an old woman before your time. This is all I ask of you, nothing else.”

“Gregory,” she said, “you haven’t even asked me to be true to you.”

“No,” he replied, “because I do not think it is necessary; and if you were not true to me, I would let you go without so much as a regret.”

We make these assertions when we are young and untried; what is more, we mean them and we believe in them. “I would not remain in the same house with a

man who spoke to me like that!" says your miss of twenty summers. But your matron of as many winters' standing is much less free with her tongue. She has seen the folly of prodigal assertions. Age is penurious, thinking more of to-morrow than of to-day. "I would never regret," is a phrase which has passed the lips of most of us at some time or other; and Gregory Alison flung out the challenge to the future right manfully and well.

So Kit Mallinder was supremely happy. She went to fetch Mrs. Johnson that she might introduce Gregory to her, and that he might have an idea of the keeping she was in. And Mrs. Johnson made the young man many promises, and even went so far as to take him to see the little nest which she had made for the future actress.

"You ought to have a writing-table and a chair of your own," he said to her. "I will give you these. We will go out now and choose them."

"That would be lovely," said Kit.

"You will have lunch here, Mr. Alison?" Mrs. Johnson inquired.

"Oh, thank you very much, but I think we may as well get it in town somewhere." In truth he did not care to face the rest of the household in the character of Miss Mallinder's young man.

So Kit put on her hat and they went off together in a hansom cab as happy as two children out for half a day's holiday. He took her to a celebrated upholsterer's shop, and together they chose the writing-table and the easy-chair—a dainty table fit for the boudoir of a celebrated actress, and a chair that would not have disgraced the smoking-room of a West End club.

"Now, you can keep all your papers and books and parts, and such like things, in this, and you can always be comfortable in that," he said, pointing first to the table and then to the chair; "and when I am away from you, I shall know that you have at least these two every-day

comforts about you. I am quite sure that there is nothing to be gained by what I may call the martyrdom of discomfort. I heard of a lady the other day who, being left a widow, borrowed a thousand pounds to continue her husband's business, and brought it to a successful issue, living the while herself in a garret, seven stories high, on ten shillings a week. I always thought," he went on, with his worldly-wise air, "that she would have got on better if she had made it a pound a week, and had either borrowed a little more or put a little less into the business. A more utterly uncomfortable woman it has never been my lot to know. Always on the alert, always on the go, always on the watch, as if she were counting the sands of time as they dropped one by one through the hour-glass of life into eternity. I don't believe," he went on, "that that poor woman could sit down in an easy-chair and enjoy half an hour's quiet if salvation depended on it."

"But I never intend to grow like that!" cried she.

"I should indeed hope not! If ever you feel yourself going that way, take my advice, and go in for a new line altogether."

"Yes, I will do that," she said. And then they both laughed, as if the most wonderful witticism had passed between them.

It does not take much to amuse or to interest lovers. The purchase of the chair and table completed, they strolled out into the street again, and went off to lunch. And then they did a picture gallery or two, and Gregory proposed that when they had dined they should spend the evening at the Coliseum.

She was still so unsophisticated, so new to the profession, that it never occurred to her to ask for seats, and Gregory paid for a couple of stalls with the air of a wealthy young prince. By dint of great good fortune they found themselves in the front row, so that not a

single detail of the play was lost to the girl, who sat drinking in every word, and watching every gesture with the deepest enthusiasm, for was she not, in the immediate future, to be one of this gifted band? She felt herself, as she watched Mary Warrender, the most beautiful and fascinating actress upon the English stage, moving to and fro, qualm after qualm of fierce, sickening awe. Would any one ever look at her as she looked at Mary Warrender? Never, never! And yet Mary Warrender must have begun at the beginning, she must have had a *début*, she must have had a first performance, she must have been a novice once!

The play was of that order which is called costume, Lavender took the part of a man well known in European history. It was a wonderful presentment; astute, crafty, wise and full of electricity, he seemed to pervade the entire play with his wonderful magnetic presence.

"Isn't he wonderful?" she exclaimed to Gregory, as the curtain dropped for the second time. "Isn't he marvellous? And it is the most wonderful of all to think that only a few days ago I sat and talked to him as if he were quite an ordinary person—at least, almost as if he were an ordinary person," she added, with a sudden correction of herself.

"He must have been charmed to talk to you, and to be talked to as an ordinary person," said Gregory, sturdily. For his part he would far rather have seen a burlesque, or a good opera-bouffe, than this intense, and to him somewhat tiresome play. "I think, you know, he'd be a tiresome old chap to be always about one, don't you? Always dodging behind curtains and listening behind doors. That ubiquitous kind of old Johnnie must have been very hard to live with. I don't wonder they tried to poison him and to stick knives into him, do you?"

Something went through Kit Mallinder's heart. It was not exactly a pain, but it was a feeling akin thereto.

"You don't like it," she said, reproachfully. "You're bored."

"No, no, I am not bored—not a bit ; I only said what I thought. I do think that old chap a shade tiresome, don't you? And, by Jove, if history is to be believed, his contemporaries found him tiresome enough. By Jove, fancy having a colonel who wanted to lead that kind of life, who had the post-bag every night taken up to his quarters, and went through the contents without so much as a 'with-your-leave' or 'by-your-leave.' Why, life wouldn't be worth living. I beg your pardon," he said in a different tone, as an attendant approached.

"Miss Mallinder, stall number seven and eight?" said the man, interrogatively.

"Yes, this is Miss Mallinder."

"Mr. Lavender would be glad if you would go round, madam."

"Go round? Where?" said Kit.

"I will show you the way, madam. Mr. Lavender wishes to speak to you."

As Kit rose without hesitation to obey the summons, Gregory also rose from his seat and followed her. As they reached the door into the corridor, the attendant turned back.

"Mr. Lavender said nothing about a gentleman, sir ; I don't think he expects you."

"No, no, that's all right. I will come as far as the door with Miss Mallinder," said Gregory, easily.

Then the man opened a small door, and Kit disappeared along a narrow passage. She had never been behind the scenes before, excepting at the amateur performance, which did not count. It looked very dingy and dirty, and the back view of the forest scene, which was then in process of setting, was disappointing, and even a little startling.

"Mind your head, madam," said her guide. "This way, if you please."

Then he let her down another passage, a low, narrow, uninteresting passage well away from the stage, and knocking at a door on the right, he invited her to enter.

Mr. Lavender was sitting in the same chair in which she had seen him before, and he rose to meet her as she entered the room. He was clad in all the glory of violet velvet, silken hose, and many diamonds. They glittered upon his shoes, they twinkled at his knees, they made a rivulet of light down either side of his velvet coat, and blazed from the deep frill of rich lace which fell below his throat.

"So you have come to see the piece?" he said, taking her hand. "Charles, bring some tea, and ask Miss Warrender if she will be kind enough to come in as she passes the door. So you have come to see the piece?" he said again.

"Yes, Mr. Lavender; I—I hadn't seen it."

"So! And is that the future husband?"

"Yes, that is Mr. Alison."

"Ah! Why didn't you bring him with you?"

"Well, you didn't ask him. I shouldn't have dared——"

"Tut, tut, child, I am not so formidable as that."

"I think you are more than formidable," said Kit, naïvely.

Mr. Lavender laughed.

"Perhaps it is as well that you should think so. Tell me, do you like the play?"

"Oh, yes, only——" And then she broke off and looked at him, with her soul yearning in her eyes.

"Only what?"

"Well, I have been thinking. All the time that the curtain was up I kept thinking whatever should I do!"

Mr. Lavender laughed—a short laugh indicative of the keenest amusement.

"You won't play Miss Warrender's parts straight off,

you know," he said in a quiet voice, and with no twinkle of amusement about his face, unless it was in his deep-set eyes. "We don't burst into glory at the Coliseum ; we do a little at a time. Every one of us learns something every day. I have been thinking about you a good deal to-day, partly because I want to please my old friend Sir John Trench, and partly because something about you tells me that you are in earnest. The play is good to run for a couple of months yet, and I cannot keep you waiting about all that time without a chance of coming on and growing accustomed to the feeling of the stage—the way to walk up and down, and tread and so on. So I am going to have a little page's part put in—just at first without a word to say, and afterwards, if you do that well, you shall have a line or two. Miss Warrender has always said that a single page looks poor, and doesn't dress the stage enough. Did you notice the little page with the scarlet velvet cap and the white feather?"

"Yes," faltered Kit.

"Well, if you will come to-morrow at eleven o'clock, I will order your dress to be got ready for you at once. I have told Miss Warrender all about you, and I hope that she will be down in time to see you before she goes on. I think I hear her."

He went to the door and opened it, Kit waiting meanwhile with a dreadful sensation knocking at her heart. So, after all, she was to make her first appearance in tights !

CHAPTER IX

MISS WARRENDER

As Mr. Lavender stood holding the door open, there was a sound of light feet and the *frou-frou* of silken skirts in the narrow passage outside.

"I have only half a minute, Philip," said a gay voice out of the gloom.

"Never mind, half a minute will be enough. I want you to meet Sir John Trench's little friend," was Lavender's reply.

The next moment the gracious figure of Mary Warrender came flitting into the room.

"So this is our young recruit," she said, holding out her hands to Kit, without waiting for any more formal introduction. "So this is our young recruit. Ah, my dear, if all you children knew when you were well off, you would leave the stage alone! It is a hard life, my dear child, a wearing life."

"But there are compensations," ventured Kit, who was more shy of this brilliant lady than she would have been even of Lavender himself.

Miss Warrender started, and looked at her more closely.

"You should do well," she said, in a different voice; "you have a quick tongue and a pretty wit. And you are right; there are compensations. One toils night after night, for weeks at a time, and then there comes one when it is worth the trouble. You are going to make her a page, Philip?" she said, turning to Lavender without waiting for any reply.

"Yes, a companion page to Gaston. It will dress the scene better, and give her a chance of learning the A B C."

"And it is a pretty costume for a beginning," said Miss Warrender. "There, I am called. Good-bye, my dear, good-bye. If I can be your friend in the theatre, I will; there's my hand on it."

She flitted out through the open door, and Lavender looked at Kit.

"You are aching to be back again in your place. That's right; I like a real, good, enthusiastic playgoer, who doesn't want to miss any of the show. But you will have a cup of tea?"

"Not for me, thank you ; no, not for me."

"I always have tea between these acts ; and here let me give you one word of advice, which will stand you in good stead from now to the end of your career. Never take anything stronger than tea or coffee during the progress of a play. It is so easy to have a little liqueur, to take it as a sort of medicine, just to make your feet dance and your heart light ; but that is a rock upon which many a young actor, ay, and many a young actress, has split and been shipwrecked. And now I must send you away. To-morrow morning at eleven, and you shall be measured for your first appearance."

Gregory Alison stood waiting in the corridor just where she had left him.

"Oh, have you been waiting all this time?" Kit cried.

"Not exactly. I went and refreshed myself with a drink," he said, sensitively ; "and having had a drink I naturally came to wait for you. I have seen three people I know, all very anxious to know who I am with, and all thinking you a person of considerable importance that you were sent for to go round."

"But how did they know? You didn't tell them?"

"No, I didn't tell them. But one fellow happened to hear the message, and I suppose he told the others. And how did you get on?"

"Oh, I got on all right," said Kit. "I was introduced to Miss Warrender."

"Was she nice to you !"

"Yes, awfully—most kind."

They went back to their seats then, and Kit sat wondering how she should break the news to Gregory that she was first of all to be a page.

"Greg," she said at last, "Mr. Lavender is going to put a little part into the play for me."

"To put a little part in? How?"

"Well, he says there won't be a change for at least

two months, and just to give me a chance, and, I think, a little to please Miss Warrender, he is going to have two pages instead of one."

"And are you going to be the other page?"

"Yes." She uttered the word in a tremulous little voice, scarcely audible above the noise of the orchestra.

"Are you going to wear the same kind of dress?" he asked, sharply.

"Yes. You won't mind, will you, Greg?"

"No, I sha'n't mind; all the best actresses have played a page at some time or other. But I don't know what mother will say. You see she is inclined to take things wrongly, and she may not be able to see the difference between a page at the Coliseum and a dancing girl in tights at the Gaiety. However——"

"Hush! There's the curtain."

No consent could have been more complete than Gregory Alison's acceptance of the news that Kit was to begin her dramatic career as a page, with a scarlet velvet cap, a white feather fastened by a diamond clasp, and nether garments suggestive of masculinity. Kit went at the appointed hour to meet a celebrated costumer, who initiated her into the mysteries of transforming herself into a page, and when the great night came, and with a beating heart and palpitating emotions she found herself in the presence of the British public, she had indeed crossed the Rubicon and cast the die.

"By Jove, you looked stunning!" said Gregory, as he met her at the stage-door. "You had better come and have some supper after all that."

"Why, I am not tired, Gregory. I have done nothing. Besides, the other page—the one I dressed with—she had a tin of biscuits, and she shared a bottle of lemonade with me; so that I had rather go straight home, if you don't mind."

"No, no; come and have some supper."

"No, Mr. Lavender warned me against gadding about,

and I don't want to get into the way of going to supper after the performance is over. There will always be something to eat when I get home, so that I sha'n't go to bed hungry, and I want to begin, Greg, as I mean to go on."

She carried her point, being, as I have already shown, a young woman whose will was fairly strong, and they went straight back to Charlotte Street together.

And then, after Gregory had no more leave, and was compelled, perforce, to return to his regiment, Kit settled down into the ordinary routine of life, as quietly as if, instead of an actress, she had become a teacher in the National School. If only Mrs. Alison could have known it, the girl instructing the infant mind in a National School had more time and opportunity to get into mischief than the young student of dramatic art who found herself under the wing of Philip Lavender. For life at the Coliseum was a life of hard work ; no idle, dissolute pandemonium was the kingdom over which Philip Lavender ruled. Within the theatre all went with the strictness and precision of a military code, and the one who lived the most strictly, who lived the most thoroughly the life of a student, was Philip Lavender himself. For days together Kit did not see him except upon the stage, and weeks passed without any sign that he was taking further notice of her, or interest in her, than to have given her the little part of the page.

In due course, as he had promised, a line or two, a word here, a salutation there, were put in for her ; then she received instructions to understudy one of the minor characters of the play. This was the part of a young girl—a sort of rival of the heroine of the piece ; a dainty, charming, idealistic part, to play which would be an enormous advance on the work she was doing.

At last her opportunity came. Owing to a sprained ankle, the principal could not appear, and the under-

study, otherwise Kit, took the part in her stead. To Kit it was as formidable as any ordinary first night afterwards became. Sir John Trench and his lady were present, and at least half a dozen journalists whom he had asked as a personal favour to attend the performance, and Gregory came up from Aldershot on purpose ; and Mary Warrender fussed about her, giving her hints and encouraging her in every way that was possible. To Kit herself the result seemed nothing short of hideous failure. She had studied the part so diligently, had watched her principal so closely, that she seemed unable to get inside the character, try as she would. But when it was over Mary Warrender whispered to her, "You'll do," and Lavender patted her on the shoulder with a word of encouragement. The morning brought her a note from Sir John Trench asking her to go to tea at Chesham Place the following afternoon, and one of the morning papers spoke of her as "Miss Mallinder, a young actress of great freshness and great distinction of style ;" another paper spoke of her as a "new discovery of Mr. Lavender's ;" and Gregory, of course, told her that she was too adorable for words."

And that was the beginning of Kit Mallinder's career. She played the part nightly, and at the various matinées, for nearly a month, as the sprained ankle, which was the cause of her chance, continued extremely troublesome and difficult to cure. Then Miss Neville came to her own again, and Kit's candle was promptly put out.

"Philip," said Miss Warrender to Lavender, when Julia Neville was back at the theatre once more, "what are you going to do for little Mallinder now?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing !" she echoed.

"Well, I don't see that I can do anything. I have given her a very good chance, and Julia Neville most obligingly sprained her ankle just at the nick of time ;

but you cannot expect her to continue an invalid just to oblige a new-comer."

"Of course not, Philip ; how tiresome you are ! You are not going to put the child back to page's work ?"

"I can't do that ; at least it would be unadvisable. But she can continue the understudy work."

"That is heart-breaking business," said Miss Warrender.

"She must wait," said Lavender, in a tone of decision. "She has had a better chance than most girls. She has done brilliantly, and I am very well pleased with her ; but no theatre can be run solely for the benefit of the novices who want chances."

For a week or two it seemed as if there was practically nothing for Kit but stagnation—stagnation and the drawing of three guineas a week. Then she received an offer from another manager for the run of a piece just about to be produced, and Mr. Lavender was pleased to lend her, as the phrase goes, for the engagement.

Kit's new manager was called Harry Blake, a man of different calibre from Philip Lavender ; a man who had no ideas about high art ; one who was himself a brilliant comedian, and ran his theatre purely as a place of amusement and for the purpose of making money. The play itself was the work of a modern playwright, one Walter Langton, half comedy, half domestic drama. He had been one of those to see Kit during the time she had played Julia Neville's part at the Coliseum, and he had marked the exquisite freshness of her voice and manner, her airy charm and grace, and the general daintiness of her style. The part assigned to her was as fresh and unspoilt as herself. It was, as he said, a big risk to give so prominent a part to so young an actress, but the end fully justified his choice.

"My dear child," he said, when he met her for the first time at rehearsal, "you are new to this work, and

your only chance of succeeding is to do precisely what I tell you while you are in rehearsal. If I had wanted somebody to create the part, I would have chosen Beryl Barrington. She might have done great things with it ; but she is just a little too studied ; she knows just too much to give me precisely what I want. I want the smell of the new-mown hay to waft across the footlights to the public. I want my Daphne Challoner to be as simple and as sweet as violets under a hedgerow ; I want her to be as unstudied as the buttercups and daisies which we gather in the meadows in the early morning. If you can be all that,—that is to say, if you can be yourself,—you will have the greatest success that any girl has had upon the stage within my recollection. It is easy enough to play heavy parts ; it is easy enough to rant and scream and snarl like a dog, as Mrs. John Sloane is doing every night at the Piccadilly ; but to give a real, fresh, dainty presentment of sweet and charming youthfulness, so that every man will feel, “My wife was like that once, and my daughter will be like that to-morrow,” is the most difficult task which can be set to any young actress. Now, will you do your best?”

She turned a pair of eloquent eyes upon him, shining with purpose.

“Mr. Langton,” she said, “I may not succeed—why, because I may fail ; but if I fail, I promise you it will not be through my conceit or through my obstinacy. Whatever you tell me to do, I will do.”

He brought his hand down on her shoulder with a reassuring thump.

“You’ll do ; you’ve the right stuff in you !” he said. “I know the real thing when I see it ! I didn’t go half a dozen times to the Coliseum to watch you for nothing.”

“What did I tell you—what did I tell you?” chuckled the playwright to the wife of his bosom as the curtain went down upon the second act. “Didn’t I say she was

made for the part? Isn't she perfect? Listen to those people! Ay, my friends, shout, shout on, the harder the better! The British public may be dense, and the British critic may be a fool—most people seem to think he is—but one thing is very certain, that when the British public and the British critic get hold of a good thing, they generally know it and do honour to it. That's right, my friends, have her back again; up with the curtain. I thought she'd do it!"

And then Walter Langton, all anxiety at an end, left his box and his wife, and went below to mingle freely with the crowd of friends in the *foyer*, and to receive the congratulations of the multitude, not only upon his new play, but upon his new find.

From that moment Miss Mallinder's success as an actress was assured. Her name was in everybody's mouth, not as a great artist, but as a fresh, simple, delightful child-woman. Wicked old sinners, who had long ago forgotten the virtues of the mothers who bore them, extolled her charms in language which had for years been a stranger to their tongues.

"By Jove, sir, the young ladies of the present day can take a lesson from that charming little creature! If there were more like her there would be fewer cases in the Divorce Court, fewer scandals in the clubs. By Jove, sir, she's a walking sermon on femininity, and I don't know when I have seen such modesty, such innocent coquetry, such pretty, simple, affectionate ways, such charm of breeding and carriage, such a perfect specimen of an Englishwoman."

In truth, it was as well that the girl could not hear all the praise which was lavished upon her. Had she done so, she might have failed to recognise wilful Kit Mallinder, who had pouted for want of a clean white frock, and deliberately flouted her future mother-in-law.

There was a big party on the stage that night, to which

Kit was bidden, but she excused herself, with firmness, from being present.

“No, Mr. Langton,” she said, when he came to her dressing-room and insisted that she should withdraw her refusal to the manager. “No, Mr. Langton, I am sorry, I must go home—I must go straight home. I faithfully promised Mr. Lavender that I would not go gadding about, making a fool of myself socially. I was very small potatoes yesterday, and I may be very small potatoes tomorrow, and I want to keep my wits about me, and not have my head turned by a lot of silly compliments not worth the breath they’re spoken with !”

“But I won’t excuse you,” said Walter Langton, in his most masterful tones. “I particularly want to introduce you to my wife, for one thing. She is dying to make your acquaintance.”

“Mrs. Langton is dying to do nothing of the kind, and if Mrs. Langton is dying to make my acquaintance, she can ask me to come and have tea with her any afternoon that there isn’t a *matinée*, and I will be charmed to accept the invitation. I am not going on the stage tonight, Mr. Langton, and so it isn’t of the least use you asking me.”

“You’re a very obstinate little miss,” said he.

“Yes. I know that. But I promised you that my obstinacy should not stand in your light, and I have not let it do so. It won’t stand in your light that I’ve gone home to my bed like a good girl. On the contrary, they will say, ‘How sweet, how good, how simple, how domesticated of the little girl to go home to bed like a good little child that has said its lesson !’ It will make a far better impression than if I went on to the stage now, strutting about like a peacock, and drinking in all the praise I could get.”

Walter Langton stood and looked at her fixedly.

“Little woman——” he said.

“Sir !” she made reply.

“I thought down to this moment that you were a simple, guileless, unaffected little girl from the provinces—what you professed to be. It seems to me that you have got as long a head upon those slight young shoulders of yours as ever Philip Lavender had upon his.”

The ghost of a smile flitted over the girl's face.

“And if I have, Mr. Langton,” she said, “that would be all the better, both for you and for me.”

He burst out laughing, patted her on the shoulder again, and betook himself away.

“The heroine of the hour?” he replied, in answer to a question put to him as soon as he showed his face among the goodly crowd on the stage. “Gone home to bed. Refuses to come in—absolutely, flatly, determinedly. Would not even come to be introduced to my wife.”

“What !” cried half a dozen incredulous voices.

“No ; says that if my wife will ask her to tea by herself she will be charmed to go; but that she is an actress, and is not going to fritter herself away on society. And so, my dears, if you want to see the lady you must come and pay ten and sixpence to do it !”

“Tell me, Mr. Langton, is she as charming off as on? Is she—I mean, would you call her a lady, a well-bred woman ?”

Mr. Langton looked at his questioner intently, rubbed the palms of his hands slowly together, and said,—

“Yes, I should call her something more than a lady—she's a good 'un. Well-bred, refined, cultivated, a lady in the best sense of the word, to the very tips of her fingers.”

CHAPTER X

SUCCESS

THE following morning Kit Mallinder was surprised by a visit from Philip Lavender. She had breakfast in bed, and had afterwards risen at her leisure, and was expecting Gregory Alison every moment. When Harriet, the housemaid, came up to her bedroom door and told her that there was a gentleman in the drawing-room to see her, she answered carelessly enough,—

“All right, Harriet, I will be down in half a minute.”

“It isn’t the young gentleman, miss,” said Harriet, who was a friendly and communicative young woman, deeply interested in the love affairs of everybody with whom she came in contact.

“Oh! Who is it, then?”

“Well, here’s ’is card, miss.”

Kit crossed the room, and took the bit of pasteboard out of the girl’s work-worn fingers. “Mr. Philip Lavender,” she read.

“Oh, thank you, Harriet.”

She found Philip Lavender alone in the handsome but dreary drawing-room. He was standing near one of the long windows, holding his hat in his hand. As he heard the sound of the door closing, he turned and came to meet her.

“My dear child,” he said, “I congratulate you many times. Your success is perfectly assured. Have you seen the papers?”

“No, not yet, Mr. Lavender, not yet.”

“Not seen the papers! Hadn’t you the curiosity, as soon as your eyes were open this morning, to send out and buy the papers?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head in a way which left no doubt as to her truthfulness. “I have neither asked for nor seen a paper yet.”

“But did you not want to know what the world was saying of you?”

She looked at him a little roguishly.

“Why, yes, Mr. Lavender,” she replied, “I wanted to know badly enough, but I was afraid they might say disagreeable things. I thought that if there was good news somebody would bring it, and if there was bad news the longer I could put off knowing it the better.”

“My dear child,” he said, “there can be no bad news after such a success as you had last night. Do you know that I had a message brought down to me after the first act to tell me that the public had taken to you?”

“Not really? I did not know it—I mean, that the public had not found fault with me—at least, I knew that they hadn’t found fault with me—I mustn’t tell stories—but I really did not know for certain that I was a success until the very end, and even now I don’t feel very sure about it.”

He put his hat down upon the table and opened a bundle of newspapers which he was holding in his hand.

“Sit down here,” he said, drawing her to the sofa, set endways to the window by which they were standing, “and read these. It will probably take your breath away, and you must discount a little of it. By-the-bye, why did you not show last night? I came to the party on purpose to congratulate you.”

“You did!”

“Of course I did. And they told me that you had gone home to bed; that nothing would induce you to remain. And I——”

“Yes,” said Kit, “and——?”

He took hold of her hand.

“My dear little girl,” he said, “I was disappointed

not to see you; but I admire you more than any words can express that you had the common sense to take your triumph so well, and to go away and leave people a little curious about you."

She flushed up scarlet under his grave, critical eyes.

"Well," she said, "I don't know that it was altogether common sense, Mr. Lavender. To tell you the truth, I was dying to go to the party."

"And why did you not?"

"Because when I first came into your company you told me that I could not serve two masters; that it would be bad for me to be seen here, there, and everywhere; and I made it my rule then that I would not go into society, and I have kept to it. And besides that, my—my young man"—with a charming smile breaking over her face—"came up from Aldershot to see the play, and he had not been asked to the party."

"So you went off to supper with him?"

"No, I came straight home. The lady of this house gave us some supper, but it was a very mild dissipation, I assure you."

Philip Lavender seemed for a moment like one brought to a sudden standstill, then his stern face broke into a smile, and he patted her head.

"You are a very good child; you deserve every ounce of your success," he said, in his kindest voice, "and some day you will be very thankful that I gave you that particular bit of advice, see if you are not. Of course, the gallant *fiancé* was extremely pleased and proud of you, and loved you all the better that you did not care to go and drink your fill of intoxicating flattery at the hands of strangers, leaving him out in the cold. I will leave you these papers. You have only to go on as you have begun to be in a year or two at the very top of the tree. You are exceptionally gifted, you have sense and good breeding, and, best of all, you are honest; and I am

very proud that you made the first steps of your dramatic career under my wing. But remember," taking both her hands, and looking down upon her searchingly, "remember that I have only lent you to Walter Langton. You are still mine ; you still belong to me, and I have always the first claim upon you."

She ran to the window to watch him go down the steps and get into the cab which was awaiting him. Perhaps it was only natural that her heart should be beating high and all her pulses stirring briskly. To have so great a man come personally to congratulate her on her success was a tremendous thing for one so young in the profession, and Kit had never under-valued Philip Lavender's kindness and friendship ; indeed, up to that moment she had never dared to think of him as a friend, oh, no. As one of the girls at the Coliseum had said one night to another when Philip Lavender had passed Kit in the wings with a pleasant word of greeting,—

"It's quite pathetic to see little Mallinder when Mr. Lavender speaks to her."

"Gone?" asked the other.

"Not a bit, she wouldn't presume so far. Her adoration for him is a fetish. If he told her to jump out of a window she would probably go and do it without a moment's hesitation, like the Roman soldier that—you know the story."

"I don't," said the other girl, her eyes wandering over the bit of stage that they could see from their place of vantage. "What was it?"

The first speaker turned and looked at her with intense amazement in her eyes.

"You don't know that story?" she said, "and yet you are a member of Philip Lavender's company ! Well, the whole world is funny, but that part of it that calls itself dramatic is funnier than all the rest put together !"

"What was the story?" asked the other, curiously

“ Oh, the story of a visitor to a great general in Rome—old Rome, you know—speaking of devotion and discipline, when the emperor, or the general, or both, in order to show his idea of discipline, called a soldier to the ramparts, where they were talking. ‘Jump down there!’ he said. Whereupon the man saluted, and instantly sprang into some hundreds of feet of space.”

“ Was he killed?” asked the other.

“ Killed? My history didn’t tell me whether he was killed, but I should think, after jumping down some hundreds of feet, he probably would be. Anyhow, he’d have died by this time, so it’s all the same.”

“ I don’t see,” said the girl, who now heard the history for the first time, “ I don’t see what that has got to do with Mr. Lavender and little Mallinder.”

“ Don’t you? Then it’s no use my explaining it, my dear! There’s your cue.”

But she was right for all that. Her little story, ill-told and halting as it had been, had fallen upon stony ground, but the girl’s conception of Philip Lavender’s character had been quite true, for it was his curious influence which made the prestige of the Coliseum what it was; that curious attraction of Lavender himself which made the members of his company do what he wished, not because they always understood his reason for wishing it, but simply because his will was stronger than theirs.

As she stood there watching the hansom drive away, another cab drove up, and Gregory Alison jumped lightly out upon the pavement. He was with her a couple of minutes later.

“ Well, dearest,” he said, “ I have brought you all the papers; but, of course, you have seen them?”

“ No, I have not seen a single paper, Greg.”

“ Not seen a paper? Why, my dear child, you’ve got half a dozen there!”

“ Yes; but I’ve not looked at them.”

“What a queer child you are ! Why not ?”

“Because I never thought of sending out for any ; and if I had done, I should have been too frightened to look at them. But Mr. Lavender came to congratulate me, and he brought them.”

“Lavender !” Gregory spoke in a different tone.

“Yes. Wasn’t it kind of him, Greg ? He went to the party last night expecting to find me there ; I think he was pleased that I had been strong-minded enough not to go. He asked if you were pleased at my success.”

“He asked if I was ! Ah ! so he came to see you and to congratulate you. Ah ! that was very decent of him.”

“If you had done something to win public favour,” said Kit, “and if you cast all your strength upon one die, and your colonel went twice a special journey for the purpose of congratulating you, would you call it very decent of him ?”

He laughed a little.

“Well, dear, that was a mere *‘façon de parler.’* It was awfully good of Mr. Lavender to come and tell you that he was pleased at your success. Of course he was pleased ; he started you ; he was interested in you ; you are still one of his company. I didn’t mean anything nasty. Why should I ? Now, let us look at those reviews together. I’ve got every one that I could lay hands upon. By Jove, Kit, but this will make the people at home sit up !”

It was true enough. It did make the people at home sit up, especially Mrs. Alison, that dignified lady who had accused her son’s sweetheart of wishing to disgrace her. From the moment that “Buttercups and Daisies” first bloomed its way into public favour, Mrs. Alison graciously overlooked everything that had gone past. While Gregory was still going through the papers with Kit, a telegram came couched in these words :

“Fondest congratulations from all at the Rectory.”

She handed it to him with a little mournful sigh.

“Ah! my dear!” he said, “it’s a sign of the times. Success does such wonders for us. It was only a few weeks ago—well, a few months—that my mother talked about you disgracing us, and now all eyes turn to the rising sun. I suppose it is natural.”

It might be natural, but Kit suddenly broke down into passionate weeping. It was in vain that Gregory upbraided himself and his family alike, it was in vain that he called her every endearing name, and Heaven to witness that he had believed in her from the first. The girl was excited and overwrought, she had borne the burden of a heavy strain right gallantly, but the deadly anxiety had told upon her, and her natural excitement would have its way.

Gregory’s great anxiety was lest she should refuse to be in any way reconciled to his mother.

“You know, dearest,” he said, when he had soothed her into calmness again, “people will have prejudices as long as the world lasts, and now that the mother has come round you won’t stand off, will you?”

He need not have had any fear. Kit was only too anxious to have no break of any kind with his people. She never forgot for one moment that he had implicitly trusted her in what might have seemed to some people a wild-goose chase. She did not forget that Mrs. Alison had, in more senses than one, right on her side. So, when the family from the Rectory came to town specially to see the new play, “Buttercups and Daisies,” Kit went to see them at once, looking more charming than ever in her black garments—for she was still wearing mourning for the aunt who had been everything to her.

“Why, Kit,” exclaimed Mrs. Alison, surprised out of herself, “how little changed you are!”

“Changed!” said Kit. “But what did you expect

me to be? Dressed in spangles, Mrs. Alison, with my face an inch thick in paint and my hair dyed golden?"

"I don't know what I expected," said Mrs. Alison, swallowing her pride and making the best of the situation, "but not to find you just what you left us."

And then she kissed Kit, and the two girls seized upon her, and the dear old Archdeacon explained that for his part there was nothing he loved better than a good wholesome theatre.

"Something with a good deal of laughter and a few tears in it," he said, in his bland and urbane voice; "something to show one the good side of human nature, with, perhaps, just a little lesson against wickedness—but not too pronounced, my dear, not too pronounced."

"Ah, wait till you see 'Buttercups and Daisies,' Mr. Archdeacon," said Kit, merrily.

"I have read the reviews of it; I am looking forward to to-night with the very greatest pleasure."

How she played for them! Never had the piece gone so merrily or the tears fallen so freely, and Mrs. Alison owned herself conquered.

There was no longer, therefore, any question in the Alison family as to the wisdom of Kit continuing in the profession into which she had entered in defiance of Mrs. Alison's plainly expressed opinions.

"Of course," Mrs. Alison remarked to one or two of her most important neighbours after her return to Little Gracethorpe Rectory, "if the child had been an heiress it would not have entered into her mind to do anything of this kind; she could have shone in amateur theatricals, and she would have contented herself with that. But under the circumstances, being practically unprovided for, and Gregory being one of a really large family—only a poor parson's son—it would have been a sin to hide such a talent under a bushel. And there is nothing in the least fast or forward about the child—oh, not in

the least. She is not at all altered, and she lives in the most private and retired way possible with a very worthy person who was well known to poor dear Miss Whitaker. Poor old lady ; it makes me quite sad to think that she never saw her child's success, she would have rejoiced in it so thoroughly. I really don't like to think that she passed away without knowing anything about it."

"It must have been a great thing for her to know that the little girl was safe under your protection," said the great lady to whom she was speaking. "Of course it is always a risk when a girl goes on the stage, because the stage is an excuse for a good deal which is not legitimate drama, though I believe, at least I am told—my sons and my daughters tell me—far less so than used to be the case. I am sure, if one goes to a fashionable dinner-party nowadays in London it is quite a dull affair if there is not some prominent actor or actress at it, and the gulf is as wide between such people as those and the poor creatures that one hears of charged in the police courts with being drunk in the streets, as it is between the merchant princes of London or Liverpool and the good old soul who keeps the general shop in my village. Indeed, dear Mrs. Alison, you are to be congratulated on having let her follow her own inclinations instead of thwarting them, as some in your position might have done."

And to all such remarks Mrs. Alison was wont to lend a willing ear, smothering with a resolute hand any little qualms of conscience with which she might be troubled.

So time sped gaily on. When we are well occupied and successfully time never hangs heavily upon our hands, and to Kit Mallinder the weeks seemed to fly. "Buttercups and Daisies" still held the boards. More than once the ladies had had new dresses, and more or less handsome souvenirs had been presented to audiences on hundredth and two hundredth and other big nights. There seemed no likelihood of the piece waning in popu-

larity. Twice Harry Blake himself had been out of the caste for a few days owing to throat trouble, but Kit had never once given her understudy a chance of taking her place, and as she continued in brilliant health and spirits, and seemed but to act better with each performance, nobody could pretend that the profession was bad for her, or she in any way unfitted for it.

And with each week that went by came nearer and nearer the time that Gregory Alison must bid farewell to the land of his birth, and enter upon his new life in the burning East.

CHAPTER XI

MRS. GREGORY ALISON

As Gregory Alison's time in England grew shorter, so was he proportionately less inclined to leave Kit behind him. At that time she was earning fifteen pounds a week, and there was no prospect of her earnings being less; rather, indeed, the contrary. Her profession was by that time regularly spoken of by the Alison family as one speaks of the unalterable, and if Gregory had suggested her throwing up the stage and going to India to live on his pay and the allowance he received from his father, he would have received but scant sympathy from any member of his own family. Yet, not unnaturally—nay, I should be more honest if I said naturally enough—the more he thought about the coming four years when he would be away from her, the less he liked the prospect.

“Kit,” he said to her one day, about two months before the time fixed for sailing, “I hate going to India and leaving you.”

"So do I," she replied, quickly.

"You do love me?" he continued.

"Oh, Greg, you know that I do."

"Very much?"

"Yes, Greg, very much ; you know it."

"Would you make a sacrifice for me, Kit?"

"A sacrifice? That would depend. What sort of a sacrifice?"

"Kit," he said, hurriedly, not answering her question directly, "I can't go out and leave you here by yourself—here where you are continually under observation, continually in the way of meeting new people, open to all sorts of temptations. Kit, give it up ; come out with me to India ! We shall live ever so comfortably on what I have."

She looked at him more than doubtfully. For a moment she was swayed by her inclination, which was towards him. The next minute, however, the thought of her work, her career, her ambitions, and her triumphs came upon her, and she shook her head.

"Don't ask me to do that," she said. "How could I give up when I have had such a success, when even your mother admits that I was right? Dear old Greg, you know that I love you, but if the prospect of living on your pay and your allowance was so terrible before, what difference is there now? I shall not need less money than I did when auntie died, but more because I have become used to more ; and it is madness to talk of giving up a profession in which I have succeeded so far, and in which I am making so much money. Your people would think I was mad, your mother would blame me all my life. I would do a good deal for you, dear old boy, you know that I would ; you know that I love you ; but it is asking too much, Greg, indeed it is."

He groaned in utter dejection.

"I hate leaving you," he groaned out between his

teeth. "Once my back is turned, every Johnnie in London will be after you."

"Every Johnnie in London has not been after me so far."

"No, because I have always been about ; you've always had me to turn to for everything ; but when I am thousands and thousands of miles away—what then?"

"Well, then I shall be as now. Of course, I shall miss you, but you will always be with me in spirit. Dear old Greg," she said, putting her hand upon his shoulder, and looking at him very tenderly, "you don't suppose that because you are going to India, I shall pick up young men in the street and carry on anyhow, do you?"

"I am not afraid of you picking up young men in the street, Kit ; if there was nothing else to fear, I should go away easy in my mind. It's the fellows you don't meet in the street that trouble me—the fellows that you meet in the ordinary way of society."

"But you can trust me, Greg?"

"Oh, my dear, in the ordinary way of trusting, of course I can trust you. But supposing some fellow comes along, and you get in the course of time to like him better than me. Where shall I be then?"

"But I shouldn't allow any fellow to come along and like him better than you ! You are talking nonsense ! I have given you my promise, and that, to me, is precisely the same as if we were married."

Innocently enough the girl's words put a new idea into the young man's head.

"As if we were married ! Kit, why shouldn't we be married at once?"

"Because I cannot leave my work."

"No, dear, you misunderstand me. If you were my wife, it would be safer for you, and easier for me, that you should be here and I out in India. Let us be married at once, Kit—at once, without a day's delay more

than is absolutely necessary to arrange the formalities. I shall have leave until almost the last moment. It need not disturb your work at all. Kit, Kit, say that you will! Say that you love me enough to be married right away, and you will send me away—even though it is for four long, weary years—as happy as a king!”

She was not hard to persuade. She only made one stipulation.

“If your father and mother consent, I will do what you like,” she said, “and I think, perhaps, that it would be as well—I mean it would perhaps be easier for me when you are gone——”

“And perhaps,” he said, “you might come out to me between your engagements.”

“I don’t mean to have any time between my engagements,” she said, soberly.

However, having gained the major point, he did not trouble himself about the minor one. He promised that he would run down without delay to Little Gracethorpe, consult his father and mother, and make arrangements for the marriage to take place as quickly as possible. So that night he went down to the Rectory and talked the situation over with his father, who fully agreed with him that it would be the very best possible thing to give Kit the protection and advantage of the married status.

“And, as you say, my dear boy, there may come a time when she needs a long holiday—for she has been under a tremendous strain all these months, and she may be glad to have a few months of complete change, such as a trip to India would be. I think that is a very happy idea, Greg—an extremely happy idea. We will go and tell your mother, and then do you make arrangements for carrying the matter through with as little delay as possible. Of course I will come up and marry you. I suppose it would not be possible for you to be married here?”

“I don’t see why not. We wish it to be as quiet as

possible, and Kit could easily come down for the day. I suppose a license would be as easy to get for here as for London?"

"Oh, certainly."

So Gregory went back with the news to Kit. But Kit decided that she would prefer to be married in London, if it was all the same to Gregory.

"If I am married at Little Gracethorpe," she said, "where I have lived all my life, there is bound to be a great fuss; it could not possibly be kept a secret, and I should have to wear a very smart frock, and I would very much rather that it took place in town. Besides that, I must ask Sir John Trench and Mr. Lavender, and it might be most inconvenient to them to spare a whole day from town."

I need hardly say that to Gregory it was all one whether they were married at Little Gracethorpe or in London, by one person or by another, quietly or with considerable fuss. His only desire was to be married, and to be married with as little delay as possible. Arrangements were therefore made for the wedding to be performed at Kit's parish church, and the date was fixed for the very first day of Gregory Alison's last leave prior to embarking for India. This arrangement left Kit sufficient time to order a new frock for the occasion. She chose nothing bride-like but a smart walking-dress, such as would stand her in good stead during the few months to come. Her next step was to go down to Sir John Trench's chambers and apprise him of the new move in her life.

"Sir John," she said, "I won't keep you five minutes."

"You may keep me fifteen or fifty," said Sir John, blandly.

"Thank you very much. Well, Sir John, I have a piece of news for you."

"Another triumph?"

"No, not exactly a triumph this time. But I am going to be married."

"Going to be married! Not really?"

"Yes, I am."

"And to chuck the profession?"

"Oh, no; but Gregory is very unhappy at going to India and leaving me, and I have consented to be married. He thinks it will be a protection to me, and all that sort of thing."

"And therein he is quite right," said Sir John Trench. "I fully agree with him. It is the most sensible thing that you can do—that is, taking for granted that you really care for him and really wish to spend the greater part of your life with him. I mean this," he said, shifting his chair so as to be able to look at her, "you do really care for him—it is not a boy and girl fancy?"

"Not a bit of it, Sir John; I really care for him."

"Then the best thing you can do, as he must go to India—and I suppose it is practically necessary that he should go to India—is to be married. It is a most wise arrangement, and will be a great advantage to you in your lonely life in London. When is it to be?"

"On the tenth; and I want you, Sir John—would you—would you give me away?"

"Of course I will. By-the-bye, what does my friend Lavender say about it?"

"I haven't told him yet."

"Ah, well, I daresay he'll be very pleased. You will be much less anxiety and trouble to him as Mrs. Gregory Alison than you must be as Miss Mallinder."

"I don't consider that I am any trouble to him as Miss Mallinder," said Kit, with dignity.

"No—well, you are not in his company just now, and, therefore, I suppose you are not. As soon as you go back into the Coliseum company you will be a tremendous anxiety to everybody concerned."

"I don't see why."

"No, I don't suppose you do ; but facts are facts, nevertheless. You are going to tell him, of course?"

"Oh, yes, I am going to ask him to come. I don't suppose he will, because he never has any time, but I shall ask him. And the Archdeacon is coming, of course—he will perform the ceremony—and they're all coming. There is not going to be any party, you know, Sir John, but of course I shall send Lady Trench an invitation, and I shall be more than glad if she comes, because—because—my mother-in-law likes her, and it will make things pleasant all round. Persuade her to come, Sir John, won't you?"

"I don't think she'll want any persuading, my dear," said Sir John. "Eh? What did you say, Gordon?"

"Sir John, there's a gentleman very anxious to see you."

"I'll go," said Kit, "I'll go. Good-bye. I'll send the invitation to Chesham Place to-night."

She got into a cab at the entrance to the court and drove straight to the Coliseum. Mr. Lavender was there and was busy, but on hearing that it was Miss Mallinder who wished to see him, he sent a message that he would be free in five minutes, and in a little more than that time Kit was shown into the room in which he had first received her.

"Well?" he said, in kind, abrupt tones. "Well? Are they going to take the piece off?"

"Not that I have heard of," she replied.

"Oh, really. I made sure that you were coming to tell me that you were released."

"No," said Kit, "I came to tell you something else, Mr. Lavender."

"Yes. And that is——?"

"Well, the fact is, I am going to be married."

"Are you indeed. Oh, that is rather sudden, isn't it?"

"Not exactly sudden," said Kit. "But the fact is, Mr. Alison objects to go to India without me, and——"

"And you are going?"

"No, I cannot give up my work. So I have promised to marry him instead."

"And stay behind?"

"Yes. It satisfies him, and he thinks it would be better for me."

"And in some senses," said Philip Lavender, "he is right. In some senses, I think, you are beginning your married life under a mistake."

"But why?" she faltered.

"Well, it is a separating life at the best of times ; that is the worst thing that can be laid to the charge of the dramatic profession ; it does tend to bring in other interests, because, even when both husband and wife are of the same profession, it is not always possible for them to be together, and it is impossible to enter the marriage state, and keep quite as one, when interests are divided. All your *fiancé's* interests are, naturally, in a totally different life ; all yours will be here. When you meet again you will not be the same as you are the day that you part."

"Why not?"

"Because you are human beings," said Philip Lavender, very gravely ; "because human nature is only human nature, and it is easier to keep unchanged in a stagnant life than in an active one. I know," he went on, "that there are people who think that there is a good deal of similitude between the Army and the Stage. They are mistaken. I know it of my own experience. The woman who is accustomed to an army life can never assimilate herself really with the interests of the stage ; the woman who is accustomed to a dramatic life finds herself hampered and checked on all hands by the social restrictions which seem to be essentially a part of a sol-

dier's life. It may seem to the outsider that both are more or less nomadic careers, that both are what we are accustomed to call devil-may-care states of existence. But it is not so. I have never yet," he went on, "known the soldier who was absolutely free from the trammels of conventionality, and I have never yet known the actor who could cheerfully conform thereto. It is curious, but such is my experience. Have you thought carefully over the matter?"

"Oh, yes, and it is too late to draw back now, even if I wished to do so."

"And you do not wish! Well, well, let us hope that time will be merciful to you; that you will find in a few years that if Philip Lavender understood how to run a theatre, he was hopelessly out of it in his matrimonial predictions."

"And you will come to my wedding, Mr. Lavender?" said Kit.

"Yes, yes, I will come. Do your *fiancé's* people consent?"

"Oh, yes; his father is going to marry us, and they are all coming. Sir John Trench is going to give me away."

"Then," said he, "I will come in the guise of the ornamental guest. You have asked Miss Warrender?"

"I didn't like to do so," said Kit.

"Oh, you should ask her. She takes a great interest in you. You should ask her; it will give her great pleasure if you do so."

He rose as he spoke, and Kit, taking the hint, rose also; and as he took her hand to say farewell, he looked down upon her with eyes full of pity.

"I hope you will be happy," he said; "I hope it will all turn out for the best. You have been very fortunate so far, but not more so than you deserve. For some things I wish that you had waited until you were a little

further along your journey—a little more firmly fixed in your mind. But there, there, go away, and don't think that I was a croaker, or that I will come to your wedding and be a skeleton at the feast."

The only other guests whom Kit invited were her manager, Harry Blake, and Walter Langton, and the day following she was surprised by a visit from Lady Trench, who came to suggest that, as Sir John was going to act the part of father to her, she should be allowed to take the place of her mother, and receive the party in Chesham Place after the ceremony.

"But the trouble, Lady Trench!"

"Not a trouble at all, but a very great pleasure," said Lady Trench, decidedly. "It will please Sir John, and it will be good for you, and as your husband is so soon to leave you, it is better that you should be married to a certain extent with a flourish of trumpets. And another thing, it will do you no harm with your future husband's family that you had other friends able and willing to help you besides themselves. So shall we look upon it as a settled thing?"

So it came about that Gregory Alison and Kit Malinder were married by the Archdeacon, and that Kit was given away by Sir John Trench, the eminent Q. C., whose wife entertained the whole party to luncheon afterwards.

It was a most gay and merry festivity. The great actor, Philip Lavender, proposed the health of the bride and groom, and Gregory Alison returned thanks in the most approved and halting manner. If Kit blushed, it was because her praises were sounded so freely. There was none of the usual fuss and dampness which mostly characterises wedding parties; everybody was gay and bright and happy. Even Mrs. Alison forgot to be at all on her dignity, and joined as heartily as any in wishing health and happiness to the newly-married couple.

Then, just at the last, the great actress, Mary Warren-der, created a diversion, for she seized a moment's silence and rose to her feet.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she said, looking round the table with the sweetest and most winning smile in the world, “I wish to propose a toast. I beg you to excuse me if I do not acquit myself very well, for I am wholly unaccustomed to public speaking. If this were not so private an occasion, I would not venture to make anything in the form of a speech now, but as we are all intimate friends—or, if not intimate, friends intimately connected one with another—I will venture thus far. Ladies and gentlemen, you have drunk health, happiness, and prosperity to everybody, but there is one existence in the future to which you have not alluded, and to which you have given no sign of good will. We have drunk to the health of Mrs. Gregory Alison, we have wished her and her gallant spouse everything that is good and happy and delightful, but nobody has thought of giving the toast which I now ask you to drink—“Success to Mallinder the actress!”

CHAPTER XII

EARLY DAYS

PRACTICALLY Kit's marriage made but little difference to her dramatic life. Of course there were a few paragraphs in the papers, and a little friendly chaff when she appeared in the theatre after it was known, but so far as her work was concerned there was no alteration whatever in her. She came punctually to the moment, went through her work with her accustomed sweetness and intelligence, and for all that her comrades saw of her husband, he might have been the merest myth imaginable.

They only stayed a few days at the house of the estimable Mrs. Johnson. Like all people living under a strain, Kit had before her marriage begun to feel the want of a home of her own. She had many treasures left over from the dainty nest at Little Gracethorpe—pictures and china, bits of old silver, embroideries, and one or two odds and ends of furniture with which she had not liked to part when Miss Whitaker's home was broken up. These had remained in the safe keeping of Mrs. Alison, but no sooner had Kit made success in her chosen profession than she began to acquire possessions other than mere clothes and personal effects.

There are many times in a popular woman's life when she acquires belongings. Pictures, sketches, photographs, carvings, and many odds and ends found their way to the dressing-room at Harry Blake's theatre. These must not in any way be confounded with the offerings which find their way to the dressing-rooms of young ladies who run a brougham and an expensive establishment on a salary of a guinea a week. If Kit had gone in for society, she would have acquired certainly very many more such possessions, and, even as it was, she felt that her pretty belongings were practically of no use to her, and, as I said before, she began to feel terribly the want of a home—of a place of her own.

So almost their very first care was to seek out a tiny flat in a convenient position, where for a fixed sum Kit could have all the cares of housekeeping and catering taken off her hands, and have only her own maid to form her household. The flat that they chose was in a mansion known as the Belvedere, and in less than a fortnight after her marriage, Kit found herself putting the finishing touches to the last consignment from the large firm of upholsterers from whom they had bought their furniture.

"Now," she said, "we are all ready for the things

from home. I shall put the little oak cabinet there between the windows, Greg, and then the glass-sided cabinet will stand there by the fire, and in that I shall put all my old silver and such-like things. Do you know, Greg, I think it would be much better if the sofa stood there instead of here."

So for at least another week they amused themselves. The new home was, as I have said, small, and decidedly it was not an extravagant nest for so dainty a bird to have built for itself. But it was as dainty as its young mistress, and Gregory Alison felt that he would be much better pleased to leave his wife in surroundings which he knew, and which were absolutely their own, than he would be to leave her in the somewhat doubtful atmosphere of a private hotel.

And, oh, how quickly the days went! They were naturally a great deal together, for neither wished to miss a single moment of the very limited time which lay before them. There was no change in the theatre. "Buttercups and Daisies" still bloomed nightly, and sometimes twice in the day, and the faithful public still came in crowds to laugh and cry over the delightful piece, which one intelligent critic characterised as an idyl of fresh and charming domesticity. And then the fatal day came when Kit, on leaving the theatre, went by a midnight train to the place whence she would see the last of her young husband—her little more than bridegroom. They had half a day together, not without interruption, for he naturally had duties which could not be shirked, and at two o'clock in the afternoon the great ship weighed anchor, and Gregory Alison drifted away on to the wide ocean of separation.

Poor little Kit! It was the second great sorrow which had come into her life, and although not as bitter as death, it was still the most terrible trial that had befallen her. Her train from London was already standing in

the station ready for departure when she drove there after seeing the last of the *Himalaya*, and Kit got into a carriage by herself, giving a shilling to the guard that he should lock her in and allow nobody else to enter. Then, when they were once fairly started, the pent-up tears, which she had bravely beaten down lest she should send Gregory away unhappy, found an outlet, and she arrived home in a state bordering on collapse. Her faithful maid, who had for years served leading members of the dramatic profession, was awaiting her with comforting words and tender ministrations. She had got a small and dainty dinner ready for her—for Kit always dined in her own rooms instead of in the public dining-room of the Belvedere—and if she did not eat much, she at least was sufficiently petted and comforted to be able to drive down as usual to the theatre, and to take her part very much as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

The time after that went on better than might have been expected. She missed Gregory dreadfully at times. It was horrible to come home alone at night to find nobody but a maid-servant awaiting her. It was dreadful to have to decide every point for herself, to dispose of every holiday without reference to the charming companion who had been hers so short a time, but, without doubt, the responsibility of delighting a crowded theatre each evening and on two afternoons in the week did take off from the inclination to repine.

And shortly after Gregory Alison's departure for an Indian station, Harry Blake put on a new piece, not to the dethronement of "*Buttercups and Daisies*"—that was now well on its second year, and seemed likely to continue as the *pièce de résistance* at the Bijou—but a first piece of a wholly different order to the little idyl which had so taken the public fancy. This was the work of a young playwright of great gifts, but as yet of little fame. I could best describe it as a little cameo of grief;

and it came to Blake by a sort of inspiration that of all the actresses known to him, nobody would so perfectly take the principal part as his then leading lady, Kit Mallinder. And curiously enough the idea came to him the very night that the good ship *Himalaya* had slipped away down channel, carrying with her the sweetest half of Miss Mallinder's life.

A few days after this he called her into his private room.

"Miss Mallinder, I want to ask you a question," he said.

"Yes? I will answer it if I can," she replied, in her sweet, natural voice.

"Well, sit down there and tell me plainly and honestly—are you feeling at all overdone?"

"No."

"You are not thinking that you would like to give up and take a few weeks' rest?"

"I wasn't thinking of it, Mr. Blake. Why? Haven't I been playing as well? You know I have been in trouble."

"My dear young lady, I had no such thought as that in my mind; but you've been a very long time playing the part of Daphne, and you certainly haven't given your understudy much chance so far. The fact is—look here—I want to change the first piece. I've got a charming little curtain-raiser; there's nothing in it, but it might be made a great deal of. It will only play about thirty-five minutes. It is totally different in *gêne* to 'Buttercups and Daisies,' but I fancy that the principal part—the only girl part—would suit you down to the ground. Will you think about it?"

"May I see the play—may I read it?"

"To be sure you may. I shouldn't expect you to give me an answer without doing so. It is here. Take it home with you, and think it over carefully. Don't let a soul see the script on any account."

It was, indeed, as Mr. Langton had said, totally different in *gêne* to "Buttercups and Daisies." The scene of the play was laid in Paris during the Revolution of '93. The *motif* was a girl's heroism and self-sacrifice for the lover of her choice, and as Kit read, and she saw the possibilities which it contained, she was no longer Kit Mallinder, but a French girl of the *haute noblesse*, ready to lay down her life for the man of her heart, ay, something more than that, for it was not only to do it, but to glory in the doing of it.

Naturally enough Harry Blake made the occasion of this production as important as possible, and all the world came to see how the heroine of "Buttercups and Daisies" would acquit herself in a part of more serious character. The audience was enthusiastic, but Kit's greatest triumph consisted of a pencil note which was brought to her after the fall of the curtain. It was from Philip Lavender.

"I just managed to come in and see you," it ran. "My congratulations. Come and see me to-morrow, if you are free, about one o'clock."

So far as she knew, it was the first time that he had seen her across the footlights, and when Kit was shown into his room at the Coliseum the following morning, he rose up and went swiftly to meet her, with both hands outstretched.

"My dear girl," he said, "my felicitations are yours! I have once seen a little bit of your 'Buttercups and Daisies'—no, they did not tell you, I slipped in one afternoon when I had half an hour to spare—pretty, weak, dainty stuff; like a child's story-book, calculated to do no harm, even, possibly, to do a certain amount of good; beyond that—nothing. But this little study in which I saw you last night is stuff of quite a different calibre. It

is a mere trifle, but it has possibilities—and you have not missed them. I asked you to come to-day, because I want to say to you again what I once said before—keep straight on in the narrow path of the student. You have everything to gain by doing so. You are very young, but if you go on as you have begun you will one of these days be a very great actress. One can never be a great actress by playing only pretty domestic serio-comedy. One who goes in for broad comedy—such as Miss Wynne, for instance—may become a great artist in that line—but the line is limited. But the actor or actress who can get to the top of the ladder in serious drama can sway the world !”

Philip Lavender’s opinion was the opinion of the multitude, and the world flocked once more to the little jewelled pill-box which was known as the “Bijou” in its hundreds and thousands. Indeed, so great was the desire to see Miss Mallinder in the new part that Harry Blake reversed the order of the programme, and after the first fortnight they played “Buttercups and Daisies” first, and “An Episode” last.

And by this time Miss Mallinder’s name was one to conjure with. She could have had a dozen engagements at a moment’s notice. She was sought after eagerly and continuously. Great ladies who found their *métier* in philanthropy sought her for their entertainments, and entreated her to help them by her presence. It soon became known that Miss Mallinder could not be secured professionally at private houses, but for all sorts of charitable occasions Miss Mallinder was run after with a persistence which was embarrassing and annoying to her. For Philip Lavender barred her from doing any such work without his express permission.

“If royalty asks you,” he said one day, when a certain great lady had pressed her very hard to help at a drawing-room entertainment, “if royalty asks you, then we will

think about it. For these ordinary people you must not fritter yourself away. They will do nothing for you—at least, they will do more for you if they find that you are not to be had for the asking—no, nor for the praying.”

And after this Kit's life seemed to grow fuller and fuller with every day that went over her head. Well into the third year of its run, it was at last decided to take off the charming play “Buttercups and Daisies,” which had so long held the public favour. To the chagrin and disgust of the manager of the Bijou, Philip Lavender refused to lend Miss Mallinder any longer to that theatre.

“What will be the end of me,” she wrote to Alison, “I cannot think or tell. At present I am in the enviable position of a bone being fought over by two dogs. Mr. Blake says there is no part for me at the Coliseum, and cannot be a part so long as Miss Warrender is leading lady. Mr. Lavender says that I have been at the Bijou long enough, that he wants me back at the Coliseum, and that he will make a part for me. What that part will be I cannot think, and I should not be surprised if they did not both agree to lease me to yet another. Really, dear boy, I feel tempted sometimes to cut the whole thing, and take the very first ship which would carry me to you. Meantime, the last nights of ‘Buttercups and Daisies’ are advertised, and there has been a sort of feeble rush to see the last of it. It is but a flicker in the socket, for the run has been among the longest on record. I wish that I could be in the next piece, which is likely to be a big success ; but, after all, it was through being in the Coliseum company that I ever got a chance of taking the public, and one must pay for favour of that kind. If Mr. Lavender insists upon my going back, I shall go, though I cannot think what he will find me to do. If I should

be in the next piece I shall have a big increase of salary. We shall see what we shall see !”

Somehow this letter of Kit's, innocent as it was, cut Gregory Alison to the very heart ; perhaps because she had spoken of going out to him as the very most unlikely thing that could possibly happen, as one speaks of another life, as one jests of encompassing the impossible. He was not sure, he did not know, as he sat there with the open letter in his hand, whether he had done so wise a thing in marrying her, before it was possible that they could live permanently together. He had an uncomfortable sort of feeling that she was drifting away from him ; that, even if he threw up the Service, or if he exchanged into another regiment, she would never be the same again. She had her own separate interests, in which he could be no more than an outsider. He did not reflect that he was no more of an outsider to her profession than she must of necessity be to his. He only knew that he felt sore, almost angry ; he only knew that Kit's letters were full of her work, full of her daily interests—mostly dramatic ; that she seldom asked a question about his life, and seemed to think it sufficient if she kept him well posted in hers. It seemed to him that the slightest word of Philip Lavender was more to her than his whole existence. He did not doubt her honesty or her fidelity ; he was not afraid of lovers, but he was afraid of her shaping her life so that it would be complete without him.

In reply to her letter he wrote back by the mail which left the following day :

“The very best thing, my dearest, that you can do,” he said, “is to chuck these two gentlemen and to come out here without the delay of a single hour. I should be able to give you a perfectly glorious time. The climate here is excellent, sport superb, bungalows extremely well planned and convenient. There are only three married

ladies in the regiment—two of these being on the regimental staff—so that you would have a perfectly lovely time in the way of attention and so on. There is plenty of polo ; I have a couple of good gees and three of the smartest tats you ever saw in your life ; and we have a splendid Amateur Dramatic Club, of which, if you come out, you would be the bright, particular, ornamental star.”

In his innocence he thought that the knowledge of the Amateur Dramatic Club would be an extra inducement to Kit to give up her own profession to go out to India and become an adjunct of his. He had so persuaded himself that she would see the force of his argument that from the time that he posted the letter he—in his mind at least—regarded his wife’s coming as a settled thing ; so much so that he even spoke of it to his brother officers as a circumstance actually imminent. He put himself to no little pains to fit the bungalow up in accordance with the requirements of a mistress ; he picked up an extra tat, warranted fit for a lady, and set inquiries on foot for a trustworthy ayah. The following week he wrote to her again :

“ You will not have got my letter, dearest, yet, but the more I think about you the more convinced I am that your right and proper place is here with me. You will be a little queen out here, and I the humblest and most adoring of your subjects. It is the fashion to rail at everything in India—all the fellows do it, although half of them, nay, nine-tenths of them, don’t feel what they say one bit. It is a very fine life in reality. The servants are the best in the world, one lives in palatial style, one has the best of everything socially that is going. I had no idea before I came here that life was half so jolly, half so comfortable, or, for the matter of that,

cheap. Believe me, we can live here and save money on my pay alone. The relief when I see your sweet little face will be beyond everything that I have ever imagined. It makes me ill to think of you toiling night after night in that hot stuffy theatre, the talk and the butt of half the cads in London, going home to an empty house, living a lonely, sacrificing life, and all for what? For a few pounds a week, which we do not want. Darling, telegraph to me as soon as you receive this—just ‘Yes’ or ‘No’—that I may be quite sure you are really coming.”

He stopped when he got to this point to meditate whether there was anything else that he particularly wished to say. And just then one of the men who shared his bungalow came sauntering in with a newspaper in his hand.

“So,” he said, with a flourish of the paper, “your wife and Philip Lavender are going to play ‘Romeo and Juliet’ after all.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE NEW JULIET

WHEN Gregory Alison found that his wife was announced to play Juliet to Philip Lavender’s Romeo, he tore up the letter which he had written as a supplement to the one in which he had suggested her going out to join him in India. Instead of sending it he wrote another :

“I see by the papers,” he said, “that you are going to play Juliet to Lavender’s Romeo. I had been hoping, as you will know by the time you receive this, that you would consent to come out here instead of continuing in

your profession ; but since you have cast the die, I will say no more about it. I have quite made up my mind to one thing, however, that the moment I get my troop I shall exchange into a home regiment. I have always had an idea that I would hang on in the Black Horse until I should be given the command ; but ten more years of Indian service would mean practically ten years' separation from you, and that I cannot stand. If you will not come out to me, I must sacrifice my *esprit de corps* and arrange so as to remain in England. Every day that goes over my head only teaches me more and more how entirely you sway my life, how entirely and utterly I want you and need you. I am convinced that if you had come out we should have had a splendid time together, but since you have apparently set your feet so firmly upon the ladder of dramatic art, and have succeeded so far as to be going to play Juliet to Philip Lavender's Romeo, I, you know, darling, would be the last in the world to stand in your light. I take it that only a thoroughly selfish husband would wish to do that. To tell you the truth, I never realised until now how far you had gone in your career. It would have been so little to ask you to give up a mere drawing-room sort of part, such as you had in 'Buttercups and Daisies,' but to ask you to give up the biggest chance that an actress can have is not my idea of proving my devotion to you. At the same time, do not forget, Kit, dearest, that I am lonely and miserable and wretched without you. I search the papers first of all for a sight of your name, for some little bit of news about you. The gaiety which goes on here continually is all 'Dead Sea Fruit,' because you are not here to take part in it. I begin to echo the sentiments of the others, that India is a beastly big arid desert, no better than a huge prison-house."

When Kit received this letter she was working very

hard for the approaching production of "Romeo and Juliet." She found Lavender extremely hard to satisfy, and her bed was certainly at that time not one of roses. She felt very keenly, from Gregory Alison's letter, that, although she might be fighting a very brave fight for her place in the world, she was hopelessly out of it as regards her wifhood. Of course, they had married by Gregory's wish, under the distinct understanding and promise that her career should not be interfered with by matrimony ; still, it was none the less hard upon him that he should be out there alone—married and yet not married—with all the tie and none of the companionship of a wife.

"It is hard upon you, dear old Greg," she wrote, "to have me living in London and unable to join you. But, indeed, it would be madness to give up the stage at present. Think of one who has been little more than three years at work playing Juliet to Philip Lavender's Romeo ! It is the chance of a century. Of course, I may make a hideous failure, but he does not think that I shall. At rehearsal he is frightful—so particular, so frightfully strict, so terribly hard to satisfy. He never loses his temper ; I have scarcely ever heard him speak even sharply ; he might be in a duchess's drawing-room. And yet he is as inflexible as iron, as cold as steel, as unimpressionable as a diamond ! There ! Did you ever hear of three such chilling similes in all your life before ? I believe that his company would, to a man and woman, lay down their lives for him, and, as he does not ask for their lives in the ordinary sense of the word, he takes the sacrifice another way ; so when once you enter the Coliseum company you give up all idea of having a soul of your own. I fondly imagined, when I started out to study the part of Juliet, that as Shakspeare had been dead for about three centuries I should not have the nuisance of trying to realise the author's ideal instead of forming

my own judgment of a part. I don't believe, dear boy, that Shakspeare, if he were here, would be in it as a critic with Philip Lavender !”

The effect of this letter upon Alison was to fill him with wild regret that he had ever chosen the profession of a soldier. “Now, why the devil,” his thoughts ran, “couldn't I make an actor of myself? We could have played in the same pieces, and held the same interests, and lived the same life. As it is, her only idea of a hero is this chisel-faced Lavender. She takes it as a natural thing that I should lay myself down on the floor under her feet, and, by Jove, she seems to take it as an equally natural thing that if this Lavender throws her a civil word, she should be in the seventh heaven of delight !” Then his conscience took him to task, for above all things Gregory Alison was an honest young man, and had a natural leaning towards the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. “By Jove, it isn't fair to say that,” his thoughts ran. “I am quite sure the little woman would live in the same house with Lavender for ten years and never give him a thought. It is natural enough, when she is so utterly gone on her acting, that she should think the world of England's greatest actor. And, after all, he is right enough ! There is no getting a regiment into good order unless you gruel them in season and out of season. The best commanding officers are the hardest to satisfy. And why shouldn't it be the same with the commanding officer of a big theatre?”

And then came the news that Juliet was a success. Never before, the critics declared, at least within the memory of man, had Juliet been so completely realised as in the performance of Miss Mallinder.

“At last,” cried one jubilant gentleman, who held the dramatic conscience of a very powerful daily journal, “at last we have a Juliet who looks fifteen. During my

forty years as a playgoer it has been my duty to see many Juliets. It was my privilege to see the celebrated Mrs. Jarmyn, an actress of great intelligence but of unfortunate bulk. The playgoers of that day were great in Mrs. Jarmyn's praises, but my youthful imagination was completely quenched by the fact that she was of matronly proportions and possessed a deep contralto voice. Then there was the beautiful Miss Bickersteth, who, had she not been the mistress of a Royal Duke, would never have seen the boards at all. She had the slim and graceful proportions, but in her ability was strangely lacking." This good gentleman waded through his recollections of forty years, expressed his wonder that Mary Warrender had never essayed the part of Juliet, and wound up with a glowing panegyric on the new star—Katherine Malinder. "Charm, pathos, tenderness, delightful coquetry and innocent girlhood, all are expressed here. Philip Lavender," he wound up, "has done many brilliant things as lessee and manager of the Coliseum, but of these none can be more acceptable to the public at large than his discovery of the most graceful, the most intelligent, the most brilliantly endowed actress of modern times, now playing Juliet on the time-honoured boards of the first theatre in London."

It must be confessed that Gregory Alison laid down the paper which thus spoke of Kit with a long sigh of happiness and of relief. So she had stayed to some purpose ; so she had succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of ambition ; so the girl who was going to disgrace the family of Alison had made the name illustrious ! In that moment he was glad that she had not yielded to his wish that she should go out to India. He was glad she had carried her point to be true to herself and to the line of which life she had taken up. He was proud and pleased, and all his little world hastened to offer him the warmest and heartiest congratulations.

And, meantime, Kit herself was living in a fever of excitement. She had been petted and made much of as Miss Mallinder of the Bijou ; as the finest Juliet of modern times she was the most distinguished woman in London. She did not realise this all at once. She went home after the first night of "Romeo and Juliet" excited and happy, but not in the least grasping the immensity of her success. The papers the following day came upon her like a series of thunder claps. Her first instinct was that they were making game of her ; that the enthusiasm was the bitterest of satire. Then she got up and went and looked at herself in the glass.

"Do you realise what has happened to you? Do you realise that you are something—not mere common flesh and blood, but something out of the ordinary, something almost too precious to live? Kit, Kit, my dear, do you know that you've got to the top of the tree?—you, Kit Mallinder, the girl from Little Gracethorpe, who grumbled because she had not frocks enough, and was frightened of Mrs. Alison ! Why, it is preposterous, Kit, you little owl, you don't realise it a bit in the world ! And you haven't a soul that you can go to and have a long, satisfying talk about it. Do you realise it, Kit? No, not a bit. Why, I'm making rhyme—I must be going off my head !" And then down she dropped, and all the pent-up excitement burst out in floods of passionate weeping.

Yet, in spite of her excitement, she was a sensible girl. She cried her fill, and then she rang the bell for Maitland.

"Maitland," she said, when that sedate person appeared upon the scene, "I have cried till I am sick over the papers. I am going to telegraph down to Little Gracethorpe and see if the young ladies won't come up and stay with me. I must have some one to talk to !"

"But, madam," said Maitland, "you should be delighted and not crying over what the papers are saying

about you. I can assure you, madam, all the people in the house are agog to get a peep at you. I have been made as much fuss of this morning as if I was Juliet myself, instead of my mistress."

"Yes, I know," said Kit, "but it was such hard work last night, and you don't know how things are going. You know how excited I was."

"If I might suggest, madam, an egg beaten up in a little port wine——"

"It sounds disgusting," said Kit, leaning back and dabbing her eyes. "But that wouldn't be what you'd call flying to drink, would it?"

"Oh, no, madam, certainly not. Why, it's a pick-up you would give to a baby."

"I didn't know babies took pick-ups," said Kit; "but I do feel most dreadfully played out. I will wire down to Little Gracethorpe at once."

It was not more than an hour and a half's journey from Little Gracethorpe to London, and Kit's urgent message being perfectly understood, she received within a couple of hours a reply that the girls would start for London by the three o'clock train.

And after that life became a sort of battle-field for the new Juliet. She had been extremely popular as Daphne, but the light of Daphne was for ever put out beside the flaming success of her Juliet. Her correspondence daily grew larger and larger, and yet never seemed to come to an end. It seemed as if the autograph-hunters in the kingdom had swooped down upon the girl as a swarm of bees might swoop down upon a barrel of honey. She had enough samples of various articles to eat, drink, and wear in her rooms to have started a small shop. Circulars came by the hundred; at least a dozen photographers requested the honour of taking her in her Juliet dress, and before a week was over two great painters asked permission to paint her portrait in the same character.

To the Alison girls all this was excitement and joy and delight.

“Another batch of letters, Kit,” said Violet, on the third afternoon after their arrival.

“Any from Gregory? Is the mail in?” asked Kit, from her big chair.

“No, nothing from India.”

“Then open them all ;” which Violet, nothing loth, at once proceeded to do.

“Item number one,” she said. “Messrs. Tucker & Sons are sending for your gracious acceptance a box of soap warranted to preserve the complexion of the most lily-like fairness. Hope if you approve of it that you will send them a few lines of commendation. Have enclosed the soap in a pretty fancy box with your monogram. That must be the parcel. Shall I open it before I read the next?”

“Just as you like,” said Kit. “I am sure it’s extremely kind of Messrs. Tucker & Co.”

“It’s lovely soap,” said Violet ; “and what a lovely box !” she exclaimed, as she pulled aside the paper, disclosing a handsome carved box, on which the initials “K. M.” were a conspicuous part of the design. “Now for item number two. Messrs. Gummidge beg to forward you a packet of Dr. McIntyre’s cocoa. They would also like the favour of a few words. Item number three. Court dressmaker, very anxious to make you a gown. Item number four, autograph. Number five, autograph ; six, seven, autographs ; eight, will you sign photograph in your Daphne costume, if small girl sends it? Nine, will you give away prizes—Working Girls’ Association East End Club? Lady would like to show you, as a specimen of modern working girl, et cætera. Adeline St. John would like to take your photograph ; has taken all the Royal Family, and most of the aristocracy. Duchess of Aberdeen is very anxious to enlist your sym-

pathies for her Scotch weavers ; will you order two or three dress lengths in order that they may use your name? Especially recommends white wincey ; thinks you can do a great deal to make these stuffs the fashion, if you would ; hopes you are patriotic, and so on. Oh—oh—I say—oh, my dear——”

“What is it?” asked Kit.

“DEAR MISS MALLINDER,”—read Violet,—“I have tried hard to get to know you by legitimate means, but the heart of Lavender is hard, and all the other people I know either don’t know you or say that they don’t. Will you put aside conventionality for once and allow me to make your acquaintance in this way? I have been to the Coliseum the last three nights, but old Merridew, who knows me perfectly well, is as hard as a flint, flatly refusing to do anything to help me to get to know you. I am sending by hand to-morrow a few flowers for your acceptance. I dare not send you jewelry, or I would lay all Bond Street at your feet. Will you allow me to call upon you, and believe me, your devoted servant,

“INVERNESS.”

“Lord Inverness is the Duchess of Aberdeen’s eldest son—Marquis of Inverness. I wonder if her Grace would be so gone on getting my valuable help to make white wincey the fashion if she knew that her eldest hopeful had set his young affections upon the new Juliet?”

“Then those,” said Connie, “are the flowers that came this morning, and you could not imagine who sent them ! Well, his lordship has uncommonly good taste, I must say ; and it is delightful to have one’s rooms smothered in flowers like this. Shall you let him come and see you, Kit?”

“No,” said Kit, “certainly not.”

But Lord Inverness did visit Miss Mallinder, the ac-

tress, and, for the matter of that, before she had time to reply to his letter. That very afternoon he arrived, conveyed by a young man of Kit's acquaintance.

"I do hope, Miss Mallinder," he said, "that you will forgive my persistence, but I am so desperately anxious to make your acquaintance, and when Johnnie St. John happened to say to-day that he knew you—we have been lunching together—I simply insisted that he should bring me to see you at once. I hope you forgive him, because he really had no choice; I would have broken his head if he hadn't brought me. Oh, yes, I know, of course, that you are Mrs. Alison. Oh, yes, everybody knows that; but somehow it doesn't seem natural to call you Mrs. Alison, does it? You've taken the hearts of the public by storm as Miss Mallinder, and I am afraid that, though your husband may be very indignant, and you may be indignant too, you'll be Miss Mallinder to the end of the chapter. Somehow it seems to make you belong to us more."

He was very good-looking, this boy, of a Scotch, sandy type, big and broad of frame, and a trifle accentuated as to his cheek bones. He was very young, not more than two-and-twenty at the outside, but his manners were irreproachable, his blue eyes pleasant and ingenuous, and his adoration of the new Juliet was touching in the extreme. He talked to Kit about her husband, which was very wise, and looked at his photograph, said what a good-looking chap he was, judiciously worked in his mother and the white wincey—not in these words, but he told Kit that he wished she knew his mother, that his mother was one of the nicest women he had ever known in his life. "So wide-minded, you know, Miss Mallinder," he remarked; "such a jolly woman; and she does such a lot of good, you can't think."

"Among the peasantry?" said Kit.

"Oh, yes. She encourages local industries, native

products ; she has a regular shop both at the Aberdeen House and at the Castle. When she gets to know you, Miss Mallinder, she will certainly ask you first of all to buy something of her."

"I dare say she will," said Kit, laughing outright. "To tell you the truth, Lord Inverness, I had a letter from your mother to-day. Her specialty is white wincey."

"Miss Mallinder," said the young lord, earnestly, "I assure you that my mother is one of the nicest women in the world, and if you want to make her your slave for ever, you have only to buy a bale of white wincey and make it the fashion. There is nothing in the world she wouldn't do for you then."

CHAPTER XIV

PRUDENCE PASTURELL

MISS MALLINDER did send the Duchess an order for white wincey, and the Duchess immediately called upon her and stayed quite a long time in the dainty little drawing-room of the flat at the Belvedere, treating Kit with great civility ; indeed, making her feel that the favour was all upon her side, and that she had placed the Duchess under an enormous obligation.

"My son, Lord Inverness, tells me that he already knows you, and that you have a quite charming husband, Miss Mallinder. You must, indeed, forgive me for calling you so, but I do not know your married name."

"That is Alison—these are my sisters-in-law," said Kit, indicating the two girls whom she had previously presented to the great lady. "It is easier for people to call

me by the name that I am professionally known by," she explained. "It is very difficult to remember when one has two names, and, of course, everybody knows me as Katherine Mallinder."

"Shall I have the pleasure of seeing your husband?" the Duchess asked.

"Oh, my husband is in India," said Kit, in a regretful tone. "I wish that you could have the pleasure of seeing him—and I too," with a fleeting smile. "You see, he is anxious to stay in his regiment until he gets his troop; then he will exchange and be at home, so that we can see something of each other."

"You must bring him to see me when he does come home," said the Duchess. "Perhaps by that time you may be taking a little holiday, and you could come to us at the Castle. That would be a great pleasure to us all."

"I should love to do so," said Kit.

"Then we will regard that as settled for the time your husband comes home. Then I can show you all my poor people, and you will realise what busy lives they lead—how different to you town people, who scarce know a blade of grass from a cornstalk."

"But, Duchess," said Kit, "I lived in the country all my life till a few years ago. It is the town that I don't know, not the country. I fancy, indeed," she continued, smiling again, "that if I were to put you through an examination on agriculture you would come off the worst of the two. But I should love to come to the Castle to see all your village industries, which your son tells me are most interesting. I am having two of the wincey dresses made up now."

"Ah, yes. Do tell me exactly how."

"How? Well, one is being trimmed with golden beaver and a little suspicion of gold braiding, the other I am having braided in white. With the all-white dress I shall wear a big black hat with feathers—you know, a

picture hat ; with the other a little brown velvet toque with a couple of eagle's feathers fastened by a golden clasp."

"And when you wear them," said the Duchess, "I beg it shall be at my house, and I will have every woman journalist in London to meet you—oh, yes, I know them all ; they will do anything for me—and they shall puff my white winceys until my people at home don't know how to carry out their orders."

As she drove back to Aberdeen House a bright idea struck the Duchess. She had never given her celebrated white winceys a name ; how if she were to make some slight difference of texture and christen them the Mallinder Winceys. If she could only coax that pretty, little, dainty girl to identify herself with the new textile, she would bring comfort and prosperity to many a Scottish home in the immediate future.

"Such a lucky thing," the astute Duchess thought, "that she happens to be married ! With a son so impressionable as Inverness, he might take all sorts of ideas, and even want to make a Duchess of her. But with such an attractive young husband in the background she is safe enough in herself, and will serve to keep Inverness out of mischief."

So the Duchess made much of Kit, inviting her freely to Aberdeen House, and also her young sisters-in-law. Both were exceedingly good-looking girls, and fully appreciated the privilege it was to enjoy the Duchess's countenance. So between Juliet and the Duchess's textiles, Kit Mallinder was fairly started on the high road to social success. She went out very little, it is true, for she had but little time at her disposal, and the strain of playing Juliet was very great.

"Romeo and Juliet" had been running for three months when Miss Warrender came back from a long tour in Italy. She made her appearance at the Coliseum on the very

evening of her return home, and at the end of the first act went round to Kit's dressing-room.

"I like you," she said, "better than anybody I have ever seen as Juliet. You have the great style—Heaven knows where you got it, but it's there! You'll admit, little Kit, that, in clearing out to give you a chance of playing Juliet at the Coliseum, I did you an uncommonly good turn."

"Indeed you did, Miss Warrender," said Kit, gratefully.

"Well, I'm glad I did; I like you in the part. And you've never made love to Philip! I couldn't stand a mincing little miss here who would try on anything of that kind!"

Kit laughed outright—a ~~v~~ real laugh, full of intensest amusement.

"What are you laughing at?" asked Miss Warrender, her own blue eyes dancing with anticipation.

"Well, I was thinking I should as soon dream of making love to—oh, well, to the Sphinx as to Mr. Lavender. He would look at me, and he—oh, well, you know what he would say!"

"I don't at all know what he would say," said Miss Warrender, shortly. "What's your idea?"

"I think he would say that my dress would look better an inch shorter, or longer, or wider, or fuller. He would make me feel that I was a little provincial idiot who had forgotten herself."

"That's as may be," said Miss Warrender, still speaking rather shortly. "Tell me—what are you going to do when Juliet goes off?"

"Ah! I don't know—I have no idea."

"Because I am going to play in that new thing of Vilaro's when Juliet goes off, and I don't believe there's a part for you in it—not a part fit for you."

"Oh, well, something will turn up," said Kit. "Per-

haps I shall take a holiday. I have been a long time at work now."

Miss Warrender leaned forward in her chair.

"Take my advice—don't take much of a holiday. When you've been as many years before the public as I have, you can please yourself what you do. As soon as you are free of Juliet, go somewhere for a fortnight, and let people think that you are studying—working hard at a new part. You needn't open a book or give the theatre a thought, but somehow or another the public like to think of the stage as a very serious profession. It is serious enough, God knows, and hard work enough, God knows, but there still lingers in the general mind—which is an intensely foolish one, mind you—an idea that the modern actress who goes to ducal houses, and never heard a naughty story in her life, is in such contradiction to the old dissolute days when players were always drunk and invariably dissipated, that she has no human sympathies, weaknesses, or shortcomings. For that section of the general public, keep up the idea that you are a student; for the other section, which admires the actress of to-day, be domestic. Take a tender interest in your jam-pots and the blue plates that you hang upon your dining-room walls; be very modest and shy and humble; let it be understood that you are never so thoroughly happy as when you find yourself far from the madding crowd in the heart of the unspoiled country. Don't collect anything more vicious than teaspoons! My dear girl, believe me, if Juliet went off to-morrow, and you found yourself with six weeks before you that you might do what you liked with, nothing would so inevitably wreck your career as to spend that six weeks at Monte Carlo. No one would ever believe in you again. There, you are called! Good cheer to you, my dear. I am always your friend, and nobody is more glad than I am that you went straight to the front."

Probably, if Kit had not been in her make-up, Miss Warrender would have kissed her. As it was, she took both her hands, held them for a moment, and then flitted away with a gay word of adieu.

But all the same "Juliet" ran for nearly two months longer—ran for weeks after Vilaro's new play had been put into rehearsal, ran so strongly that it would have been madness to have dreamed of taking it off. Still, the best things come to an end in time, and at last the fiat went forth that "Juliet" was practically finished.

Immediately that it was known in the theatrical world that there was no part in the new play for Miss Mallinder, there was a rush among managers to secure her services. By this time she was free of Philip Lavender—I mean that he was no longer in a position to lend her to another—and Kit was able to pick and choose just how and as she chose. Among the many offers made to her was one from a young Irish actor of great ability and of brilliant attainments—one Lawrence Callaghan. This young man had been for years a great favourite with the playgoing public. He was a gentleman by birth, a man of the rarest ability, and of great distinction as an actor. He was going into management for the first time with a new play by one of the most successful and prominent playwrights of the time. The theme was a strange one, and the part which both he and the author wished Miss Mallinder to create was one of extraordinary power and promise.

For a few days Kit could not make up her mind as to what course she ought to pursue. Over and over again she gave a great sigh to the fact that Gregory was so far away that his advice was practically not at her disposal.

"One cannot telegraph for advice," she said to Violet Alison, as she talked over the situation with that young lady, "and even if I could write and lay everything before him, it is not the same as being here. I might cover reams of paper without being able to make Greg ex-

actly understand the lie of things, and that at the shortest would take three weeks. I think I shall take Lawrence Callaghan's offer. Fifty pounds a week and a splendid part—how could I expect to do better? Yes, I think I shall take his offer."

"But is it a splendid part, Kit?" asked Violet.

Kit turned and looked at her sister-in-law doubtfully.

"Yes, it is a grand part—unlike anything I have ever done—a nasty part—a part of a bad woman—an ingrained bad woman; and yet it will give me another chance of showing what there is in me. And there is no Miss Warrender behind to step into one's shoes the moment the play is changed. I think I shall take it."

Eventually she decided to do so, and the news soon spread throughout the theatrical world that Miss Mallinder was going to create the principal part in the new play to be produced under Lawrence Callaghan's management.

One stipulation Miss Mallinder insisted on, which was that she should have a fortnight of absolute freedom from any letters, work or worry before she began to study the part; and that fortnight, it being lovely spring weather, she spent with her sister-in-law, Violet Alison, at a quiet little place on the Cornish coast, a place wherein time seemed to have stood still for many and many a year, a place where nobody knew that she was an actress, or would have understood her life had they done so. It was primitive, old-world and fresh, a place of deep seas, of restless waves, of blue skies, and the green verdure of a beneficent and prodigal nature—a place where Kit could sit for hours drinking in the strong odour of brine from the sea and rocks, a place pre-eminently one of rest.

It is easy to recuperate oneself from long strain when one is young; it is those who have passed middle-age who find that every effort leaves them weaker, that every

rest must be longer than the one which went before it. At the end of a fortnight Kit Mallinder went back to London radiantly well, ready for anything which might happen, and most of all for creating the part of the beautiful Quakeress, Prudence Pasturell.

In all her life she had never been in such a strange frame of mind as when she was trying to get inside the part of the Quaker girl. She felt, as she thought of the *furor* which her Juliet had created, as if she were an utter and unmitigated fraud ; for Juliet had been no more to her than a tiresome piece of work, difficult and tedious in the matter of satisfying Philip Lavender. With the part of Prudence Pasturell everything was different. For six weeks she lived, moved, ate, drank, and slept to the tune of Prudence Pasturell ; she was like a being possessed by some spirit other than her own.

With the story of Prudence Pasturell we need not attempt to deal. Suffice it to say that the character was one of a fiery, untamed, brilliant nature, pent up by the conventions of a formless creed to desperation. There was passion, desire, nobility, impatience, subtlety, wild generosity, and sterling worth, all seething together in that slim personality. The character seemed to take hold of the girl as a second nature. At rehearsal she electrified Lawrence Callaghan and the author of the play alike.

“She’s magnificent !” exclaimed Aubrey Brandon to Lawrence Callaghan one day, when the piece had been in rehearsal for over a fortnight ; “but, my dear fellow, she cuts the ground from under your feet and takes the shine out of you properly.”

“What do I care for that?” said Callaghan, with a laugh. “I want a big success. I’d be content to take a four line part myself provided that I could get my theatre filled and keep it going until the end of the season. All

business with me, old fellow. I don't care a brass farthing for *kudos*; I want the *kudos* of a big success, and, by Jove, I believe we've got it."

"I believe so too," said Brandon, "though one never knows until the curtain has dropped at the end of the first night. Still, she's wonderful! So electric, so full of fire, so natural! By Jove, I didn't think she had it in her, good as she has been in everything else that she has done!"

The curtain fell the first night upon a scene of extraordinary excitement. One section of the audience howled and yelled its approval with stampings of the feet and showers of bouquets; the other, equally strong in its mode of expression, conveyed the most absolute disapproval of the play just witnessed.

"By Jove, they mean to tear down the theatre!" exclaimed Lawrence Callaghan to Brandon, as they stood at the wings. "What had we better do?"

"Do? Oh, nothing. Let 'em fight it out. That last scene was a bit too strong for a good many of them."

"They're calling for you," said Callaghan.

"All right. I'm quite ready for them."

So Aubrey Brandon stepped in front of the curtain and bowed his acknowledgments to the seething mass of people across the footlights.

"Splendid!" "Disgraceful!" "Bravo!" "Bravo!" "Shame!" were the conflicting cries which, with cheers and vigorous hisses, greeted him. And there Aubrey Brandon stood, smiling his sweetest, for this scene was, he knew, but the precursor of a widespread and vivid interest in the fortunes of his play.

Then there were fresh calls for Lawrence Callaghan, and for Katherine Mallinder, who, when she came on, was received with a perfect Babel of acclamation and disapproval. Then Callaghan escorted her to the wing, and himself came back and stood prepared to speak. It was,

however, some minutes before the tumult died down sufficiently for him to make himself heard.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said at last, “by your different ways of expressing yourselves it is plain that the play which I have presented to you to-night has not met with unqualified approval. I contend that the scenes we have shown you are in no wise exaggerated, but are faithful, realistic presentments of the truth. It goes against the grain with me to say what I am going to say now, but say it I must.”

“Go on, sir,” cried a voice from the body of the theatre.

“Thank you, I will go on,” said Lawrence Callaghan. “You have had to-night, ladies and gentlemen, a picture shown to you, a picture created by one of the first, if not the first, of living playwrights—a man as well known to you for his blameless honour as for his fidelity to nature in the plays which he sets before you. The principal part has been created by a lady who may justly be called the idol of the British playgoing public. I grieve that it should happen to this lady in my theatre that her tremendous effort should have been received with hisses. I have no doubt that to some the character and part of Prudence Pasturell has proved entirely unpalatable. So it would be unpalatable to some persons if their lives could be laid bare before the British public as the life of Prudence Pasturell has been laid bare before you to-night.”

“Bravo !” cried a voice.

“Thank you. I do not uphold the character of Prudence Pasturell, but I assert that many such women do live and have lived among us, and I am confident that in three months’ time we shall still be presenting the play which you have just seen for the first time, and that my theatre will be as full then as it is to-night. My belief in the playgoing public is unshakable, and to them I commend the play with which I have commenced my first

attempt at management. Ladies and gentlemen, I have the honour to bid you good-night."

There might have been a few hisses after Lawrence Callaghan had retired, but if so they were drowned in the great tumult of applause which followed this daring speech.

And so the curtain went down, and those who were most keenly interested in the play had no choice but to await the verdict in the journals of the morrow.

CHAPTER XV

A LITTLE SUPPER AFTER THE PLAY

WITHOUT doubt Aubrey Brandon had secured the biggest theatrical success which had been known for many and many a year. The new play was a gigantic success. Of course there were some journals which railed against the play and every character in it ; railed against Aubrey Brandon, railed against Lawrence Callaghan, and equally hysterically railed against Miss Mallinder.

"When I think," wrote the *doyen* of the *Daily Trumpeter*, "when I look back and think of the blameless lives which have flitted to and fro upon the English stage, when I think of the virtuous mothers, tender daughters, and devoted wives who have lived their career as actresses, I am tempted after forty years to sit down and ask—can such things be? The sanctity of the home, the inestimable value of feminine virtue, the tenderness, the fidelity, the purity of Englishwomen are all violated as we watch the development of the character of Prudence Pasturell. I have witnessed every play of importance which has seen the light in London for the last forty years, and I have never known what it was to feel my

cheek mantling with a blush until I saw dissected before me the living infamies of this Quaker girl. I regret alike that an actor so capable, so honest, so fresh as Lawrence Callaghan should have lent himself to this loathsome exhibition ; and, that being so, it will readily be understood that I doubly regret that the Juliet of the century should have degraded her incomparable art, and pandered to the unwholesome *fin-de-siècle* taste which, like the pomp and luxury of later Roman times, is but the precursor of our national downfall. The world will flock to see 'Prudence Pasturell'; that goes without saying. The world is very wicked. The gorgeour which pleases the eye and tickles the senses, the perfection of art, the minute care of detail necessary to a great success, all are there. Mothers will take their young daughters, who will, it is profoundly to be desired, never for years to come realise nor understand the wickedness of the play. The theatre will be full to overflowing, but the majority of the spectators will loathe and detest the play of Prudence Pasturell. Heaven be thanked there are still, in these later days, some few of us who honour and respect and admire the old-fashioned, sweetly blooming Englishwoman, perfumed with all fair and feminine graces."

It was not a coherent criticism, but it helped to fill the theatre, for almost every other journal—particularly the gnat-like journals, ephemeral and biting—took up the remarks of him who ruled over the dramatic fortunes of the *Daily Trumpeter*, and openly jeered at them. The *Gnat* itself said that its dear old friend's remarks reminded him of the story of the old gentleman and the pyjamas, and went on to remark that forty years of domestic bliss seemed to have deadened his perceptions to the fact that there are other women in the world than those whose highest honour is bounded by shirt-buttons. The other journals who took up the cry were legion,

and Lawrence Callaghan's theatre was filled to repletion. Never had there been such booking known. People were ready to pay any price, and to wait any length of time for seats. In fact, the advertisement in the papers was, "Seats may now be booked three months in advance." In the cheaper parts of the house the excitement was just as great. Every day along the street a queue began to form early in the afternoon. And every night the play was listened to with breathless attention and greeted with volleys of tumultuous applause.

It was with some difficulty that Kit secured seats for the Archdeacon and Mrs. Alison. That was when the play had been running over a month. Mrs. Alison alternated curiously between pride in Kit and the prudishness natural to her. The Archdeacon roared at the jokes and winked at the subtleties, and Lawrence Callaghan invited them to supper in his private room when the performance was over. This was partly by way of pleasing Miss Mallinder, and partly by way of diplomacy. The presence of an Archdeacon—a dignitary of the Church—at such a performance was, I need hardly say, of the greatest value to the management. Lawrence Callaghan was a wise young man. He did not wish his theatre in any way to be touched by taboo, and therefore he made a special little supper to meet Miss Mallinder's father- and mother-in-law—a supper which gave both the Archdeacon and his wife a wholly new idea of the standing of the stage.

The only other guests besides Kit and the two Alison girls were Aubrey Brandon, the author of "Prudence Pasturell," a distinguished Oxford professor, a famous painter, Lord Inverness, and the Duchess of Aberdeen. The supper was beautifully served and exquisitely cooked, the wines were of great perfection and iced to a turn, the company was merry, but it was the merriment that might have obtained in a palace. Mrs. Alison was genuinely

astonished, for, in spite of Kit's unaltered manners, she still had an idea that "theatre people," as she called them in her heart, could not meet for any little conviviality without immediately becoming absolutely disreputable.

And presently, when the eatables had all been disposed of, Lawrence Callaghan left his place and went round beside the Archdeacon at the other end of the table.

"Mr. Archdeacon," he said, "I would like to have your candid opinion of the play."

"My dear sir," said the Archdeacon, genially, "I will give you my opinion in one sentence. It is the finest sermon I have heard preached for years."

As a theatrical manager, Lawrence Callaghan had modelled himself upon his old chief, Philip Lavender. At the Archdeacon's words he crossed his legs, strained himself back in his chair, and rubbed his fingers stiffly to and fro over his chin.

"Well, now, Mr. Archdeacon," he said, in his most confidential tones, "I am very pleased to hear you say that, because we have had a great many reproaches hurled at us which are absolutely and utterly unjust, and even an actor, you know, has his feelings—has his feelings. And it is hard, when you are doing your very best, to be openly reproached as a king of public polluters of the young and innocent. Of course, with a wide-minded woman like the Duchess, I felt pretty sure of my ground. A duchess carries great weight, Mr. Archdeacon; and it is a good thing both for your daughter-in-law and for me that the Duchess of Aberdeen is as wide-minded, and, I may say, as morally influential as she is. But when I get the opinion of a man in another position—a high dignitary of the Church, a man of weight, learning, and personal influence—I get something more than the influence which even a duchess

wields ; I get what I may call the opinion of an expert in morality. And I must confess with pleasure to you that it is very comfortable to me to feel that you do not condemn the play which you have seen to-night. It is strong, it deals with very deep subjects, such as are not always openly discussed ; but we all know that these deep and weighty questions exist, and I do not believe it is possible that they can be discussed more delicately and more—more—more——”

“And with greater subtlety,” suggested the Archdeacon, drawing in his under lip and looking very wise.

“Yes, Mr. Archdeacon, you are quite right—with greater subtlety—than has been accomplished by my friend, Mr. Aubrey Brandon. I, personally, have no taste for plays which may be characterised as loose ; I make for success—as every actor who goes into management does—but it would take away all the savour out of the salt of my success if I knew that I had made it by anything approaching to or pandering to infamy. That reproach has been hurled at me,” he went on, speaking very gravely ; “but while I know that I am on the right track I can afford to let them say what they will, and it is the opinion of such men as yourself which tells me definitely whether I am on the right track or the wrong one. So that I thank you with all my heart for coming to-night, and still more for giving me the privilege of your presence privately and the encouragement of your good opinion.”

On the whole, the Archdeacon and Mrs. Alison went home from Lawrence Callaghan’s theatre that night extremely well pleased both with themselves and with everybody else.

“As nice a young fellow,” said the Archdeacon, “as I have had the pleasure of meeting for many a long day—simple-minded, modest, and thoroughly steadfast. Envi-

dently in a good position, my dear, if one may judge of a man by the company he keeps."

"What puzzles me," said Mrs. Alison, taking no notice of the Archdeacon's remarks, "is the wonderful way in which little Kit has taken her place in the world. To see her to-night, in her little plain black frock, without a jewel or even a flower, sitting there, the centre of everything—the pivot upon which everything turned—with as little embarrassment as you stand in your own pulpit, my dear ; it is wonderful !"

"Blood will tell," said the Archdeacon.

"Yes, evidently so, for dear old Miss Whitaker was a lady, a perfect lady, if ever there was one ; and although little Kit was brought up simply, quietly, and, I may say, even meagrely in Little Gracethorpe, she is as dainty a little lady as ever drew breath. I am sure, when one thinks of that child making all that money—fifty pounds a week—it is extraordinary."

"And thinking only of Gregory," said the Archdeacon.

"That is not wonderful," said Gregory's mother ; "no, that is not wonderful."

"It is very lucky for Gregory," said the Archdeacon.

"Well, yes, it is," returned his wife, dubiously ; "it is. But it is very hard upon him to be out there and she here in England, particularly when she is living such a life—I mean such a life of interests, of interests separate from his."

"Still," said the Archdeacon, "my dear, that is only for a time. The boy will have his troop soon ; indeed, as you know, he may get it at any time, so that we need not pity him too much. Of course, it is hard for him to have to leave his young wife, very, very hard, but it would be a great deal harder if he had to leave her, as he might have had to do, in less affluent circumstances. Think if she had had to go out and earn her living as a

governess, or something of that kind, when he knew that all her toil meant toil with practically no return. She might have had to do all sorts of things ; I mean work which would have been disagreeable and disheartening, and practically without remunerative results. Oh, I don't pity Gregory very much. He will be back in next to no time, and they will be as happy as you please when he does come."

Meantime Kit and the two girls had gone home to the Belvedere together. They always stayed with her, but the Archdeacon and Mrs. Alison preferred to go to their old quarters in a favourite hotel just off Piccadilly. Almost the same thoughts were flitting through Kit's busy brain as were occupying her father- and mother-in-law. She could not help seeing how she had come in the light of an astonishment to Mrs. Alison. "I suppose she thinks that I ought to be scared by the Duchess," she said to herself ; "and perhaps I ought to be, but I'm not, not a bit. Auntie always said that I had no need to be scared by anybody, and auntie was quite right. After all, the Duchess couldn't play Prudence Pasturell." At this point she was so intensely amused by her own thoughts that she burst into a peal of gay laughter.

Violet Alison woke up from a somewhat sleepy condition with a start. "What are you laughing at, Kit?" she exclaimed. "What is it?"

"I was thinking," said Kit, "that was all."

"Are you often taken that way?" asked the girl, gaily.

"No, not often ; such funny thoughts don't often come to my mind."

"Do share them with us."

"Well," said Kit, "I was thinking how amazed your mother was to-night with my self-possession ; she looked as if she thought I ought to be scared by a real live duchess. And then the thought came to me that if she is a duchess, she couldn't play Prudence Pasturell !"

For a moment there was silence, then Connie said quietly,—

“No, but if she did, everybody would go to see her try !”

And at this Kit laughed more merrily than ever.

The following day the Archdeacon and Mrs. Alison lunched with Kit to meet Philip Lavender. Kit had duly impressed upon her mother-in-law the honour that this occasion conveyed.

“To get Mr. Lavender to come to lunch to meet anybody,” said Kit, “is simply what one may call the chance of a lifetime.

“My dear Kit !” said Mrs. Alison.

“I assure you I am not speaking with any exaggeration. I never realised before what an enormous success I have had !”

“My dear Kit, you are quite foolish on the subject,” said the Archdeacon’s wife, with great dignity.

“You only say that, Mrs. Alison, because you do not understand the position that such a man takes in the world ; and I tell you it is perfectly true that it is the greatest compliment that Mr. Lavender knows how to pay me, to accept an invitation to lunch, especially on a week-day. You have never met him ?”

“Never, excepting at your wedding, when he barely spoke to me.”

“When you have done so, you will understand where his extraordinary influence comes in ; why it is that people talk of him and think of him as if he were outside the pale of ordinary human beings—as he is.”

To this luncheon she had invited her own manager and Sir John and Lady Trench, and I am bound to say that Mrs. Alison carried away with her as false an idea of the dramatic profession as she had indulged in during all her previous life. She had, up to the time of her daughter-in-law’s first success, regarded the stage as a

sort of social Sodom and Gomorrah, denizenized by persons unfit for association with such august beings as herself. After Lawrence Callaghan's supper and Miss Malinder's luncheon party, it must be confessed that Mrs. Alison went back to her archidiaconal sphere with quite as erroneous an impression as she had held aforetime. They were impressions as far apart from each other as the poles are asunder. For her the theatrical world was from that time peopled with a new race—a race courteous, quiet, studious, unselfish, even ascetic.

To her Philip Lavender, with his clear-cut monkish face, was like some figure out of history. In all her life before she had never seen such a man. His great personal dignity, his quiet reserve, his studious manner, the way in which he spoke, always when he gave an opinion with the manner of a person who knew, the wonderful fire of wit which passed between him and Sir John Trench, was a revelation to Mrs. Alison. She had heard of scintillating wit, but she had never known it before, and, somehow, on that day she realised that there were heights which she could not reach; somehow she felt that, although they were in excellent society at Little Grace-thorpe, all the well-born, well-placed, affluent people whom she knew were as nothing compared with these two able brains fencing brilliantly together.

During that one short meal Mrs. Alison realised that the elect are not necessarily of one tribe. She began to understand, as she heard her hitherto unconsidered little daughter-in-law sending out quick brief flashes of wit, like a tiny rapier between the heavier swords of Lavender and Sir John Trench, that to be of the elect you must be born, but that your birth need not of necessity be noble. I heard a great painter say once, "There are only two classes of society, the aristocracy and us." With Mrs. Alison, up to that time all society had been represented by one class of people—the county. The

county, not of the county ; in the county and not of the county. She had recognised no wider lines. In one week's visit to London she recognised the full social value of Miss Mallinder, the actress.

CHAPTER XVI

CAPTAIN ALISON

ARCHDEACON ALISON'S visit to Lawrence Callaghan's theatre gave that young man a new idea. It happened, during the few days following the memorable visit and supper party, that several people inquired of him in a more or less jocular manner as to whether the swagger old parson had expressed any opinion on the morals of the play.

"Opinion?" he returned to each question, "by George, but didn't he express an opinion! He told me that it was the finest sermon he had heard preached for years!"

"You don't say so! Well, there's never any knowing what these parsons will do or how they'll take things. I should have thought that a cut-and-dried old chap like that would have taken the cut-and-dried line, and aired all the old ideas about purity and such like. I should get a few more parsons, if I were you; it's wonderful the influence a parson has in a theatre—far more than he has out of it."

And at that moment a new idea struck Lawrence Callaghan. He was not a young man to let the grass grow under his feet, and when a bright idea struck him he lost no time in carrying it into effect. So from that moment any clergymen who arrived at Lawrence Callaghan's theatre were politely and firmly told that they would book them seats with pleasure, but that Mr. Callaghan

did not take money from the clergy. It was a clever move. Oddly enough, the scheme never found its way into the press, and many were the conjectures as to why the clergy had so thoroughly taken up the play of "Prudence Pasturell."

"What is there about it that gathers all the black coats here?" said a man one night, looking round the theatre. "There are seventeen clergymen here, and they all seem to be thoroughly approving and enjoying the piece. I shouldn't have thought it a play likely to attract parsons."

However, Lawrence Callaghan kept his own counsel, and his clergymen guests did not betray him, excepting to one another.

So the reputation of the piece grew and grew. It seemed as if the public would never be tired of it; and Kit Mallinder began to be called the actress of long runs, and to acquire, among her other jewels of reputation, that of being a mascotte. It seemed as if there could be no check to the brilliance of her career. Her great gift had carried her straight to the front, and, what was more, kept her there. The great success grew as only a great success ever can grow. There was never a wiser saying than "Nothing succeeds like success."

So time rolled on, and the play had been running for nearly six months, and seemed like to run for six and twice six again. This brought the time to the very end of the season, when Lawrence Callaghan intended to close his theatre and to make a short tour through the provinces, playing at a limited number of first-class towns, and taking a short holiday before opening again in London the first week in October.

By this time it must be confessed that Kit was looking forward to a holiday with all her heart. She had scarcely been a night out of the bill, the part was an extremely tiring and exhausting one, the heat of that year was very

great, and she began to think with a longing which was almost passionate of Scotch moors, of sea-breezes, of snow-covered Alps. She had never been in Switzerland, she had not the least idea what the Alps were like, but such was the bent of her mind. And at last they got to their closing week.

It happened one morning that Kit went into the dining-room of her flat where her sister-in-law, Violet, was reading her letters. She was very pale and weary-looking, her face not much less white than the cambric wrapper she was wearing.

"You look like a ghost, Kit," said Violet, cheerfully.

"I feel like a boiled rag," said Kit, promptly. "I will tell you what it is, Violet, I want a holiday."

"Well, you'll soon have one now."

"Yes, I know."

"Try to make a good breakfast," said Violet, cheerfully. "I believe that is one of the great secrets of keeping well. You don't eat enough. This kedgeree looks awfully good."

She was a very helpful and judiciously kind girl. She poured out Kit's coffee, coaxed her into eating the kedgeree, told her one or two bits of gossip which she had gathered from her letters, and ministered to her generally in a way which made the jaded actress feel years younger and pounds better. Then Kit began in a desultory kind of way to open her own letters, while Violet took up the newspaper and glanced at the contents.

They had not sat thus for more than two minutes when Violet uttered an exclamation.

"Oh, Kit, oh, Kit," she said. "Oh, Kit!"

"What's the matter?" said Kit. "Bad news?"

"No, dear, not bad news. He's got his troop."

Kit's face suddenly bloomed out to a fine roseate hue.

"Oh!" she said, with a sigh of relief. "Then it won't

be long before he will be home again. Oh, how I wish he could come while I am free."

"You will telegraph the news?" said Violet.

"Telegraph! Had I better?"

"Oh, yes, I should. He will know it sooner, and when you are making arrangements, every day is precious."

The result of this announcement, and of the telegram which was soon speeding on its way to apprise Gregory of his changed rank, was that he hurried up his affairs so as to get home as soon as possible. He had been so impatient to return to England that he had privately made all arrangements for transferring himself as soon as he should be gazetted to his troop, and by the time Kit was free of her work and entered upon her holiday, Gregory Alison was due to arrive in his native land.

She went to town to meet him. She went alone; for as the time drew near for his arrival a curious hesitancy took possession of her. She felt as if she were going to meet a stranger, some one whom she did not know, and who did not know her. And in a sense she was right.

Personally Gregory was more attractive than ever. The three years which he had spent in India had bronzed him to a fine copper tint; he was broader than of old, though still lithe and lean. In manner he had gained, and it must be remembered that in manner Gregory Alison had never been wanting. He was intensely attractive, and as Kit saw him coming along the platform to meet her, her heart gave a great sick throb of anxiety at an end. And he thought her lovelier than ever.

"You are just the same," he kept on saying that first evening; "not a bit spoiled."

"Did you expect me to be spoiled?" she asked at last.

"No, not exactly; but I did think you might have got

to look—well—I did think it possible that you might show the stage a bit more than you do.”

“In short, you thought that you were coming back to somebody you would be thoroughly ashamed of.”

“Oh, my dearest!” he exclaimed, “what nonsense! How can you suggest such a thing even in jest?” he cried. “It was only that I didn’t dare to think you would be so little altered as you are—you who have made such a great name, you who have gone to the very top of the tree, as you have done—I did not dare to think you would be just the same when I came back again. It is the most wonderful thing to me. I never dared to think that my wishes would so completely come true as that I should find you just as you were, the same sweet, unspoiled little girl, all redolent of the country.”

“Ah, dear boy, it is little enough of the country that I have had,” said she, smiling at him.

“You have longed for the country again?”

“Oh, yes, in a way. But I couldn’t go back to Little Gracethorpe and exist, as I used to do. It would be impossible. I have lived since I began to work.”

She had a whole month of holiday before her, a whole month in which she need think of nothing, worry about nothing; only give herself up to pure and absolute enjoyment. It was like a new honeymoon. They went down to Little Gracethorpe for three or four days, and then they went abroad; for, as Kit said, in the past her peregrinations had been limited, first, by means, and then by want of time. “And now that I have three weeks to spare, do let us go and see something outside our own country.”

It was, of course, all one to him where he went, so long as he was with her. They took their tour leisurely enough, and few people who met them would have believed that this quiet-looking, soft-eyed girl was the great actress who had set England on fire. Practically they

were incognito during the whole of the time, which, as she explained to him, was one of the advantages of her not having gone much into society.

“Which, I think,” said he, “is rather a mistake on your part. If you have the chance of going into good society, the more you see of it the better.”

“Not for an actress,” she said, with decision; “and we are reaping the benefit now in being left to ourselves.”

I think that the most curious effect of his reunion with Kit upon Gregory Alison was the fact that he had always to subserviate his plans and wishes to hers. Not that she was in the least bit dictatorial, never was anybody less so; but for the last three years she had been in the habit of always settling all questions for herself, and it had become a habit with her that she could not defer to the opinions or indeed to the wishes of others. Their very tour, of course, depended upon her engagement with Lawrence Callaghan, and in a certain sense it fretted him that she had only three weeks at her disposal. However, they returned to London in time for her to attend the rehearsals for the reproduction of the great play, and for a whole week they religiously went to a theatre every night, for, as Kit said, she had so little chance of seeing what others were doing that she had not the smallest chance of getting a wrinkle from any one else.

He soon found that there was no going to other theatres, or stirring in London, without its being known that Kit was Miss Mallinder, the actress. Every evening, in whatever theatre they went to, Kit held a little court between each of the acts, and Gregory Alison soon found that Kit's world set but little store by him; indeed, he found himself continually elbowed to the back of the box with but scant ceremony, and it was evident that the majority of men, and ladies, too, who came to pay their court to Kit believed him to be but some ordinary hanging-on young man. Once or twice Kit forgot to intro-

duce him, or did not think those who came to visit her worthy his acquaintance, and purposely omitted to make him known to them, but on such occasions he was fretted beyond any words to express.

"Don't all these Johnnies know that I'm your husband?" he asked, rather crossly, one night, when several young men had reluctantly betaken themselves off out of her box.

"Oh, no, I don't suppose they do, dear," she replied. "You see, they're not one's intimates. If I were to introduce them to you, you might think it necessary to ask them to come and see us, and that would be a great nuisance. I will introduce anybody worth knowing to you."

"But I don't like you knowing all sorts of people that you don't think it worth while I should know," he objected.

She looked at him with mild surprise.

"Dear boy, an actress can't help herself," she said, gently.

"It cannot be necessary to your position that you should know all these people—all these fellows."

"No, not to my position; it is one of the accidents thereof," she replied, smiling. "But I only know them like this, you know, in a theatre; I never let them cross my threshold. I should have no peace of my life if I did. Never mind now, dear, the curtain is going up."

He leaned his arms upon the front of the box and fixed his vexed eyes upon the stage. Presently, however, his attention wandered to the stalls below.

"Now, who the devil is that sandy-headed chap glaring at you?" he asked, in a vexed undertone.

"Oh, be quiet," said Kit; "I can't look at everybody who stares at me. Dear old boy, you will have to get used to people staring at me—I never think about it."

She would not turn her head in the direction that he

indicated, and, presently, when the curtain was lowered for the end of the second act, he exclaimed aloud again,—

“By Jove, he’s grinning at you now as if you were a little barmaid!” in a disgusted voice.

With a sigh Kit turned her eyes towards the stalls.

“Oh, that’s Lord Inverness,” she said, in a tone of relief.

At that moment Lord Inverness bowed and rose in his stall. In a couple of minutes he was knocking at the door of the box, and Kit had introduced him to her husband. Lord Inverness, if young, had still extremely good manners, and he, in spite of his dismay at finding that Kit’s soldier-husband had actually appeared on the scene, made several courteous inquiries with an apparent interest which he was very far from feeling. But, on the whole, Lord Inverness’s visit a little mollified Gregory.

“He’s not a bad sort of chap,” he remarked to her afterwards, in tones of immense superiority to so young a man, “but all these common little city Johnnies are too horrible; you ought not to encourage them.”

“My dear Greg,” said Kit, laughing outright, “two of those common little city Johnnies were young men on very important newspapers, and the actor or actress who can afford to disregard such Johnnies, as you call them, does not yet exist. I am obliged to be civil, both for my own sake and for my manager’s sake, to every one of such people as those; and besides that, they are extremely nice, and have been extremely good to me, and I must ask you to be exceedingly civil to every one of them. It will do me irreparable damage if you are not.”

It was the first time that she had spoken to him in such a tone, and Gregory Alison fairly stared at her in astonishment. He had the good sense, however, to see that she was right in her attitude, and he was still

glamoured by the unaccustomedness of her society. So he changed his tone, and said,—

“Oh, of course, if it is necessary that these people should be considered, I will be civil to them, but they don't strike me as being men of my own class, or of yours ; and I do think, and always have thought, that it is a thousand pities for any man or woman to know people of a different class to themselves, sociably, I mean ; a matter of business is, of course, quite another thing.”

So the tiny rift was passed over without further trouble. But in the mind of both there was a lingering doubt, a difference, a something which had come to mar the full enjoyment of their bliss. For in Kit's heart there was a certain feeling of restraint, a sensation that she was no longer a free agent, she who had been not only free, but omnipotent in all that pertained to her ; and on Gregory Alison's side there was a more sharply defined and more disagreeable feeling, a realisation, indeed, of a fact—of the fact that he stood completely outside his wife's life ; that he was in her world but not of it ; that he was an outsider, an onlooker, almost an ex-crescence.

CHAPTER XVII

HUSBAND'S RIGHTS

THE following evening saw the revival of “Prudence Pasturell.” He could not understand her excitement.

“But you've played the thing for six months,” he said, at last ; “you can be in no doubt about it.”

“Oh, Greg, dearest, I cannot make you understand !” she exclaimed. “Perhaps when you have seen the play you will understand me better.”

"Well, perhaps. As it is, I really cannot understand your being at all nervous about a play that is a settled thing."

Lawrence Callaghan had very early in the course of his management given Kit a tiny box to call her own. It abutted right on to the stage, and held but two people. The corresponding one on the opposite of the house he had reserved for himself, that is to say, for his own use. And here Gregory Alison sat alone, to watch his wife in the part which had been one of her greatest successes.

He had never in the least realised her popularity until he heard the roar which greeted her as she came upon the stage, and saw her as she stood there in her dove-grey gown, with her little white fichu upon her shoulders, bowing and bowing and bowing, amid those thunders of tumultuous applause. At last the tumult calmed down, and the play proceeded.

"Well?" she said, as she got into the brougham in which he was awaiting her. "Well," speaking very nervously, "tell me, what do you think of it?"

His answer seemed to freeze the very marrow in her bones.

"I think," he said, in a cold, cutting, deliberate voice, "that it was the most disgraceful exhibition I have ever seen in my life; and, as my wife, I forbid you to appear in the part again!"

For a moment Kit sat quite still, struck dumb with amazement.

"Greg," she said at last, "do you realise what you are saying?"

"Perfectly."

"Do you understand what you are asking me to do?"

"I am not asking you," he said.

She laughed a little. "Well, ordering me to do?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"Greg," she cried, "you cannot realise what giving

up the part would be to me—what ruin it would be to my manager. It is an impossible thing even to suggest. My dear boy, don't you realise that I have made one of the greatest successes of the century?"

"Anybody could make that kind of success," he said, coldly.

"Your own father and mother have been more than once, been and approved. Your father says it is the finest sermon he has ever heard preached in his life; he told Lawrence Callaghan so."

"It is a sermon to which I object as preached by my wife, exactly as I should object, if I saw you lying drunk in the gutter, to you being used as a homily against drink."

At this moment they arrived at the Belvedere. She jumped from the carriage and ran upstairs. Once in her own sitting-room, she turned round to him with a passionate gesture.

"Greg, dear," she cried, "I assure you nobody in the world looks at it in the light that you do. Don't ask me to ruin my whole career, to ruin my manager who has given me such a chance, who has made me the most famous woman in England at this moment. Didn't you see how they welcomed me back to-night? Didn't you hear how they thundered their applause at me. Would they have done that for a woman whom they despised, whom they regarded as you seem to think of me? I cannot give it up, Greg. You are asking me to give you a kingdom. Why, only to-day Lawrence Callaghan put my salary up to sixty pounds a week. How could I go to him after that, and say that I am going to throw him over? Nobody else could play it——"

"Nonsense, there are hundreds of women in London who would play it to the life; it is a part that any wicked woman could play."

"Oh, Greg, you are so short-sighted, so foolish! I

tell you there is not another actress in London who could play it—I have seen my understudy try. I assure you, Greg, she was too ludicrous for words ; they would have hissed her, if they had not known that I had sprained my foot and could not stand. I have had such pleasure in my work, such satisfaction in my triumph, and it has all been for you—for you. All the time I have been on the stage I have been thinking about you, counting the days till you came back ; and now, the first time you see me, you take it all wrong ; you make me wretched, miserable ; and now you want me to do the most dishonourable thing in the world. I cannot do it—you mustn't ask me to do it ! Why, I have even your own father's approval. There have been, I assure you, Greg, hundreds of clergymen to see the piece—they've come in shoals. And as for me—nobody has ever dared to say one word, one breath against me in any way whatever ; from first to last I have been a true and faithful and dignified wife." She drew herself up and looked him full in the eyes, with all the outraged pride of a wronged woman, defying him to prove one jot against her honour. " You have no right to ask me to make any such sacrifice. It is an unnecessary one. If it prevented me from going into society, you would be within your right, because it would blemish me as your wife. But the society I frequent is as good as you will find in any regiment, either at home or abroad. The whole world is open to me—the whole social world is at my feet. To ask me to give up my great part is to seriously imperil my career. When we were married, you undertook that my career should be unchecked. As your wife I have been absolutely yours. You left me here, alone in London, a mere girl, practically without a friend to protect me, because you would not sacrifice your career—not by a step, but by a little time only in gaining that step. You hadn't been gone above a few weeks when you wanted to cry off your

bargain—you wanted me to throw up my career because—because you didn't like India without me. And now that you have come home, you make this preposterous proposal to me !”

“I propose nothing !” said Gregory.

“No, no, you don't ; I wrong you in saying so, I pay you too high a compliment—you order me to abandon my great part. Well, Gregory, I am sorry to refuse you anything, but to give up the part of Prudence Pasturell while the play is in full swing, while I am welcomed in my theatre as you have heard me welcomed to-night, is beyond any reasonable order from a husband to a wife.”

“Then you refuse?”

“I do refuse. No,” she said, putting up her hand as he was about to speak, “don't, I pray, say anything that you may be sorry for, don't say anything that you cannot take back, don't say what I see in your eye, that if I won't do what you order you will go out of the house and wash your hands of me. Wait a few days to think it over ; see the play several times ; go down to Little Gracethorpe and see what your father and mother have to say ; talk to other people ; go and talk to the men at your club ; but I entreat you, Greg, for God's sake do not persist in a demand which will make a break between us.”

“If you cannot give up this one thing for me,” said he, in stern and unyielding tones, “your love must be very small, and worth very little.”

“You have no right to say that to me, Gregory, you have no right. I might as well accuse you of having no love for me, because I asked you for something absurd or preposterous which you could not give me. I know perfectly well that it is because you love me—and you love me too much—that you look at this part in an exaggerated way ; you see everything in an exaggerated light, out of all proportion to reason.

I am asking you to wait until you have learned the verdict of the world, until you have seen not only that I am honoured in my theatre, but that I have my own place in society, and in society that can never be anything of a detriment to you. I ask you to consult with your father and mother ; I ask you to do anything except to act on the impulse of the moment. My dear, I told you before ever I accepted the part that it was the part of a bad woman. She is a bad woman, a wicked woman ; a bad woman with traces of good which shine out brilliantly at the end, as they sometimes do in real life. She is not an indelicate woman, and there can be no more real shame in playing such a part, or rather, I should say, there can be no more necessity for shame in playing such a part than there would be in playing Lady Macbeth. She was bad, if you like. You would not object to my taking the part of Lady Macbeth ; but she was bad, cruel, vindictive, treacherous, and hesitated at nothing—not even murder. At all events, Gregory, promise—promise me that you will wait and think before you do anything that will wreck our happiness.”

He could not help being touched at her earnestness, and her evident anxiety that nothing should come between them. He had not in the least altered his opinion, but he could not help feeling that in a sense she had right on her side. He turned away ungraciously enough.

“I don’t want to quarrel about it,” he said at last.

A passionate retort rose to her lips ; she almost choked herself to keep it down. “We won’t quarrel, Gregory,” she said, in a curiously strained voice. And then, with one look at his averted head, she turned and went out of the room. She saw him no more that night. If the truth be told, he never even tried to sleep, but he sat through the hours of the night smoking hard, and thinking, thinking, with set teeth and moody eyes, with clinched hands and fury in his heart. To think that his

wife should be hard set upon continuing to play in such a character ! It was hideous, it was loathsome to him. Of course he had taken the wrong course, he knew that ; he had put himself absolutely in the wrong, but when morning dawned he was none the less determined that wife of his should never continue in the part of Prudence Pasturell. He was not minded that the servants should find him sitting there in the dining-room, so he turned out the lights, and going to his dressing-room, made his toilet and disappeared out of the flat before the time for the coming of their early cup of tea.

And what of Kit ? Well, she had wept and cried during most of the night, and towards morning she dropped into an uneasy slumber, from which the arrival of the maid with her tea aroused her. She woke as from a hideous dream ; but, alas, there was no Gregory to greet her ; she was alone, alone with her thoughts—and dreary company they were. Her state of mind was curiously mixed. She felt on the one hand grief and distress at not being able to do instantly what he wished ; on the other, the unreasonableness of his wishes oppressed her. She was grieved that he should have looked at the part of Prudence Pasturell as he had done, and she was at the same time dimly conscious that there were unsuspected limitations in his character which had come as an overwhelming surprise to her.

It should not have been altogether surprising to her. For more than three years her ideas had been widening by leaps and bounds ; his, if they had changed at all, had been contracting. As she lay there, physically and mentally exhausted, this knowledge came to her with a kind of pang. To think that Gregory, her sweetheart, her husband, should be so completely given up to outward conventionality as he was ! The dislike he had shown to the part of Prudence Pasturell was not the first time that those limitations had struck her, by no means ;

or I should more truly say, it was not the first time that she had been made aware of limitations in his character. They struck her now with tenfold force, and the various instances which before she had but barely noticed all seemed to crowd in upon her, plainly visible and accentuated by the light of this new and surprising attitude of his. His objection to her showing civility to men on the press, his intolerance of the interest she excited, his evident desire that she should be a mere bread-and-butter schoolgirl sort of wife—it was all irksome and hateful to her. She wondered where he had gone. She wondered, in a dim, hurt kind of way, whether he had left her, whether he had shaken the dust of her dwelling from off his feet, and turned his back upon her for ever.

She was due at the theatre at twelve o'clock, and she rose presently and made her toilet, driving down to the theatre as usual in her little brougham, which was one of the few luxuries to which she was accustomed to indulge herself. Just at the entrance she met Lawrence Callaghan, who had got out of a cab a moment previously.

“Hey day!” said he, looking at her. “Why this white face and anxious look, Miss Mallinder?”

The kindness of his tone caused the tears to brim over in Kit's eyes instantly.

“I want to speak to you alone,” she said, with quivering lips.

“Why—what has happened?” he exclaimed. He led her away into his private room and closed the door behind him. “Surely nobody has been giving you bad notices?”

“Much worse than that,” said Kit, with a sigh. And then she told him what had happened the previous evening.

“Well, with all due deference to you, my dear Miss Mallinder,” he replied, “I am sorry to say that I think

your husband a fool. I know that is very strong language to use to a lady about her husband ; but you cannot break your engagement to me—you are engaged to me for the run of the piece. You cannot show that you are in ill-health, and what hundreds of clergymen have approved is not the class of piece upon which your husband will be likely to receive any sympathy in a court of law."

"You would go to law?" she said.

"Indeed I would. I would not only go to law, but I would injunct you from appearing in any other theatre while 'Prudence Pasturell' is running. I should lay claim to very heavy damages, and I should make myself excessively disagreeable. And let me tell you with all kindness—because you and I have worked together very well, without a single ruffled moment so far as I am aware of—that your life would not be worth living. I should be perfectly and absolutely within my rights, and I would use those rights to the utmost. I would do it, not vindictively against you, because I think you are one of the truest artists and one of the best comrades I have ever known, and I have the greatest respect for you ; but I would do it as a warning to the husbands of other actresses, to show them that they cannot play fast and loose with their wives' arrangements, as your lord and master seems to think he can do. You had better send him to talk to me."

"He is not the sort of person that you can send here, there, and everywhere," said Kit.

"Oh, isn't he? Well, at all events advise him to come and talk the matter over with me ; advise him to do this as the best course a reasonable person could take."

"I am afraid he——" and then she stopped short and looked at Lawrence Callaghan with a distressful face.

"Oh, you think he isn't reasonable ! It's a pity he

didn't stop in India—you were very happy without him."

"Indeed I wasn't!"

"Indeed you were! Why, since he has been back in England you have looked as I have never known you look! Why, didn't your welcome last night please him? What more did he want?"

"He didn't like the part. He has absolutely forbidden me to appear in it again."

"But you refused to comply with that wish, of course?"

"Yes, I refused," said Kit.

"Why, his own father came and was tremendously nice about the piece. My dear Miss Mallinder, it's the most absolute rot! Apart from financial loss, we should be the laughing-stock of London. I will not release you from your engagement under any circumstances."

She sighed, and rose to her feet.

"I didn't expect that you would," she said.

He rose also. And then he put his hand very kindly upon her shoulder and said,—

"My dear girl, be honest; say exactly what is in your mind, which is that you hoped I should refuse."

"Oh, Mr. Callaghan," she cried, "he doesn't understand. Why, it would be like giving up my life—it would be giving up all that makes life glorious! I told him so; I entreated him to go down and see his father and mother, to talk to the men at his club, to do anything, to take any advice, to consult anybody; but I refused to give up, oh, I refused absolutely. How could I do anything else? Why, my whole heart is in my work; I love my work. I was born to be an actress. It was there—it was bursting in me! I have only one regret in my life—that my aunt, who brought me up, never knew what I have come to, never knew that I had the chance of making my name. It is the one bitter drop in all my cup of glory."

"She was an old lady?" Lawrence Callaghan asked.

“Yes, she was old, or at least elderly.”

“Perhaps,” he said, eyeing her closely, “perhaps she would have taken the same tone as your husband has done.”

“Never!” cried Kit. “Never! She was too wide, too broad in her views. She would have gloried in me!”

CHAPTER XVIII

“THEY CRY PEACE! PEACE!”

WHEN Kit returned to the Belvedere, she found that Gregory had been there, but that he had left again, taking his portmanteau with him and leaving a note for her.

“I have not in the least altered my ideas,” he wrote, “but I am going down to Little Gracethorpe for a few days. I am bitterly sorry if I have said anything to hurt you or to wound your feelings. I have no hope and no ideal in life but yourself; my whole heart and life are yours. I may be wrong in my notions, and, if so, I am the last man in the world to wish to stick to an unjust or hard decision. I will take counsel of my father, and if he advises me to withdraw my objection I will do so ; but I think I ought to warn you that I shall always feel precisely the same. It is hateful, detestable, abhorrent to me to see you playing in such a part as Prudence Pasturell. If you had made as great a success in the part of a good woman, my pride in that success would have known no bounds ; as it is, I shall always regard all the money that you make as Dead Sea Fruit, bought at the price of my wife’s infamy, or seeming infamy, for I will not wrong you by a word against yourself, whom I know

to be everything that is good and true. But to see you lending yourself to this vile exhibition is dreadful to me; I can find no words to express strongly enough what I am feeling.—Dearest love, your own GREGORY."

She wept again over this letter, and wild thoughts entered her mind that she would go to Lawrence Callaghan, and she would plead hard that he should release her. Surely he would not set the happiness of her life against his success—his mere monetary success. He had always been her friend; he had always considered her, consulted her wishes, furthered her interest, protected her in a straightforward, honest, manly fashion. She owed him great and many kindnesses; surely he would not refuse her the greatest of all? And then the remembrance came back to her of Lawrence Callaghan as he had looked that very day, with his chin firm set, his strong, determined voice, his level, direct gaze; how he had told her that he would make life unendurable to her; how he had declared that he would take his rights to the uttermost farthing; how completely he had gauged her mind when he had bid her be frank, and own that she did not wish him to consent to her withdrawal from the piece.

She went down to the theatre that night with a raging headache; so acute, indeed, was the pain that she stopped at a chemist's shop in the Strand, and asked for some very strong dose to relieve her. The chemist asked a few questions, recognising her immediately, and gave her a strong dose and some little white tabloids, to be taken at intervals during the performance. The draught relieved her for the time from the pain, and as Royalty, passing through town from one visit to another, was present, she felt bound to make an extra effort to carry the piece as usual. Probably she had never played better in her life, but in the end she went back to the Belvedere a wreck.

Meantime, Gregory Alison, having telegraphed the news of his coming, had arrived at the Rectory at Little Gracethorpe. The family were all excited at his unexpected coming, and Mrs. Alison killed the fatted calf as effectually as was possible to do at so short a notice. In reply to questions about Kit, he said that she was all right, but it was not until dinner was well over, and he had gone into the study to smoke a pipe with his father, that he gave any hint as to the cause of his unexpected appearance. Then, indeed, he approached the subject of "Prudence Pasturell," giving his views to his father, to that worthy dignitary's intensest astonishment and dismay.

"You want her to give up the part!" he exclaimed. "I never heard of such a thing in my life! To give up fifty pounds a week——"

"She has been raised to sixty," said Gregory.

"To give up sixty pounds a week—such a position as she has made! It's preposterous—it's flying in the face of Providence! Upon my word, Gregory, I don't understand you!" The old Archdeacon was quite pathetic in his dismay.

"It is an infamous part," said Gregory, between his teeth, "and no money could adequately pay any woman for undertaking to play it. She is my wife, and I take it that no husband who really cared for his wife, or his own reputation, could wish her to continue to degrade herself and him in any such loathly exhibition."

The Archdeacon sat for a moment positively stunned by this expression of opinion.

"Well," he said at length, in a very mild tone, "I don't know whether it is that you know so much more of actual wickedness than I do, but that view of the part never presented itself to me before. I suppose, my dear Gregory, when you get to my time of life, and have sons of your own—if ever you do—that you will find that they

will regard you as an old fool who has gone about the world for sixty years with his eyes shut. I have seen your wife, little Kit, several times in the play of 'Prudence Pasturell'; I have discussed it with many other people, including several parsons. We may all be blind fools who do not know what wickedness is, but I have not recognised any degradation or any shame in this play. Your wife is good to the very inmost core of her soul; nobody who knows her, nobody who has ever talked to her, could believe otherwise. She has, most of the time that you have been away from her—very unnecessarily away from her, if you will allow me to say so—had the company of your sisters, and her reputation is—is—is—is as unblemished as your mother's; higher honour than that I cannot find words to express. Prudence Pasturell is the portrait of a bad woman—a very bad woman; but I must remind you, Gregory, that there are a great many wicked people in the world—wicked people with whom we associate every day of our lives—or with whom we may associate every day of our lives, and whom we cannot openly accuse of their wickedness. We know it, and, to use a humble phrase, we lump it; we wink at it; we shut our eyes where it is convenient to our business or to our social position to do so. This Quaker girl in the play is bad, she is audacious; her wicked thoughts and her wicked deeds are laid bare, very bare, before you. But I cannot see there is any degradation to Kit in being the exponent of such a part. It is a part which makes a huge bid for good, a huge lesson against evil. Of course she is not willing to give it up?"

"Willing! She refuses absolutely!"

"I am not surprised," said the Archdeacon. "I think, to expect a girl who has gone so completely by her own efforts to the very top of the tree in such a short time—because, after all, she is but a girl still—to give up such a part in the very flood-tide of her success and her pros-

perity is a thoroughly and utterly unreasonable wish. You—you should talk to your mother about it ; your mother understands social questions—no woman better. Talk to your mother about it, my dear boy ; take counsel of her. She is a wise woman and a woman of the world. See what she says.”

But Mrs. Alison gave her son no more comfort than the Archdeacon had done.

“Expect Kit to give up the part !” she cried. “My dear boy, I never heard anything so ridiculous in my life ! And she getting fifty pounds a week—sixty, did you say ? I never heard anything so ridiculous ! Degradation ? My dear boy, she is hand and glove with the Duchess of Aberdeen ! What are you talking about ? Infamous part ? Nonsense. Your father knows a great deal more about the effect of such representations upon the ordinary mind than you do, and your father distinctly says that the play of ‘Prudence Pasturell’ is one of the finest sermons he has heard preached for many a year—indeed, in his life. If you persist in any such ridiculous demand to Kit, you will wreck your happiness as sure as you are alive. I never heard anything so ridiculous in my life !”

“You would not mind one of my sisters playing the part ?”

“Well, Gregory,” said Mrs. Alison, with great dignity, “if you had asked me five or six years ago whether I should like to see my daughters on the stage, I should have said No—I should have said No with no hesitation whatever. But one lives and learns ; as one grows older one grows wiser and more tolerant, or it is a pity that we go on living. Since I have seen in your dear little wife what an actress is, and what an actress can be, I have completely changed my opinion of the stage and of the dramatic profession. When I think of that dear girl, little more than a child, so bravely making her own way,

so courageously upholding her own honour and the honour of your name, I marvel alike at her bravery and at her courage. Mind you, I am not speaking of her gift as an actress ; that was born in her ; for that there is no credit due to her ; admiration and many advantages accrue to her because of that gift, and for that she is not responsible. But for the upright, modest, gentle, and blameless life which she has led, for her sweet and unspoiled disposition, for her goodness of heart, her beautiful behaviour towards us, one must give her the personal credit which is due, the credit due not to gift, but to genuine goodness."

Even then he was not altogether convinced. On his return to town the following afternoon, he went to his Club before going home to the Belvedere. And there he met with a man who did not happen to know that he was the husband of Kit Mallinder, the actress.

"Hullo ! old chap," said this friend, "I thought you were frizzling in the Shining East !"

"I was," said Gregory ; "but I have just exchanged, and am on leave."

"You don't say so. Couldn't stand it, eh?"

"No ; I hated India after the first novelty had worn off."

"I see. So should I if all I hear about it is true ; but I don't intend to try it. How long have you been in town?"

"This time, only a few days," said Gregory.

"Ah ! Have you seen 'Prudence Pasturell'?"

"Yes."

"Wonderful play, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is."

"You suppose ! That sounds as if you didn't like it. Surely you admire her?"

"Yes, I admire her," said Gregory. "Do you?"

"By Jove, that I do. What a genius she is !"

"Would you like to see your wife play such a part?" asked Gregory, abruptly.

"My wife? Well, I haven't got a wife, and I am told Miss Mallinder has got a husband somewhere in the background, which is a pity. If I had a wife who could play such a part——"

"You'd like it?"

"By Jove, that I would—that I would!"

"Well, I don't," said Gregory, shortly.

"You don't! What do you mean?"

"Just this, Leger—that Miss Mallinder is my wife."

"Miss Mallinder your wife! I say, old fellow, you shouldn't have let me talk about your wife and not stop me."

"You're quite right, I shouldn't. I beg your pardon, Leger, I beg your pardon. I was absolutely in the wrong. I wasn't trying to catch you out, I was thinking wholly and solely of my own business. I came home from India a little while ago, and I confess that, proud as I am of my wife's talents, I don't like to see her in the part of Prudence Pasturell."

"My dear fellow, I never spoke to Miss Mallinder in my life, but if such a woman as she is by her beauty, and such a woman as she is by her genius, and such a woman as she is by her goodness, were my wife, I should think myself the luckiest devil in the three kingdoms. Alison, you don't know when you are well off."

"Perhaps I don't. That's my feeling, anyway. My father says I'm a fool, my mother puts it less plainly but quite as forcibly, and perhaps I am wrong. Don't keep it against me, Leger, that I asked you a question and left you in the dark. It would have been mean of me if I had had any motive less personal than I had. Good-bye, old chap, good-bye."

He strode out of the Club and down the broad steps into the street. Leger went to the window and stood

looking after him as he swung away along the pavement.

"Now, what the devil has that fellow got in his head? Isn't she as straight as they make out? What is it? Alison never used to be a particularly straitlaced sort of chap; I always thought that he was the typical wild parson's son. There's a screw loose somewhere—what the devil does it mean?"

It was an unpalatable thing for Gregory to have to go home to the Belvedere and confess to Kit that the counsel he had sought had been absolutely against him. He was not a young man, however, to do things by halves. He turned up half an hour before their usual dinner-time—arranged, of course, to suit her work—and swung straight into the drawing-room.

"Kit," he said, "I've been home, I've talked it over with my people, and I've asked the opinion of a man I met in the Club—a man who hadn't the least idea that you were my wife, and they've all gone against me. I can't say that I have altered my opinion, but doubtless my opinion is wrong. So I have come back—back to tell you that I wish I had not asked you what I asked you the other night. We will agree to differ."

She was not ungenerous enough to remind him that he had not put his wishes in the form of a request, but rose up and came to him with open arms.

"Greg," she said, "if you had held out against me it would have killed me. I can say nothing else. My dear, I went to Mr. Callaghan to try what I could do. Under no circumstances would he release me. I couldn't pretend that I was in bad health—I couldn't lie, even to please you. He would have stopped me from appearing in any other theatre while this play was running. I should have got a bad name all over the profession. It would have doomed me for ever. I should have been a marked woman; it would have been absolute ruin to me.

If you had been here, Gregory, and you had objected to the part, you know that I would never have accepted it. I had half a dozen other offers at the same time ; but having taken it, having made it an enormous success, I could not turn back. It would mean giving up the stage altogether. And since you have exchanged so as to be near me, that would seem like madness."

She looked so sweet, and she was yet so obviously distressed and worn by the brief misunderstanding, that his heart was melted. He kissed her as passionately and as tenderly as he had ever done in his life, told her that she was the light of his eyes, called himself some hard names for having given her a moment's anxiety, and so the breach was healed over.

And that night in her dressing-room between the acts Kit found time to write a letter to Little Gracethorpe Rectory.

"My most dear father- and mother-in-law," she said, "no words of mine can ever sufficiently express my gratitude to you for having convinced Gregory that it was not necessary for me to give up my part in 'Prudence Pasturell.' During the last two days I have been through the agony of a lifetime. He has told me no details of his interview with you ; only that you took my side and that you convinced him that his wish that I should abandon my part was not a reasonable one. How I bless you and thank you you will perhaps never know ; and I am sure that Mr. Callaghan must feel the same, because I went to him in my trouble and asked him whether it were possible that I could give up the part. His reply was absolutely negative. He told me in the plainest of words that if I did so it would mean ruin both for him and for me. Ruin to him, because there happens to be nobody else who can play such a part ; ruin to me because he would have to take proceedings against me,

which would damage me for ever in the eyes of all theatrical managers. I think that Gregory is convinced. Of course, in the future, I should never dream of taking a part of which he did not approve, because, whatever duty I have to the stage, I have first of all my duty to my husband. I should not have accepted the part of Prudence Pasturell against his wishes ; but it was so difficult when he was in India, and I had to decide things for myself—I had no chance of seeking his advice, because I never had the time to communicate with him. I don't know if he told you, dears, that I am getting sixty pounds a week now. Gregory is so awfully unmercenary that I do not believe he thinks of the money at all, and I—I am getting a regular little Jew, I think ; I value the money because it will make such a difference to him ; but I value peace most of all, because I should so have hated it to get into the papers that I had played a part for six months during my husband's absence of which he absolutely disapproved when he came home."

CHAPTER XIX

A NEW PHASE OF LIFE

AFTER the healing of the breach over the part of Prudence Pasturell, Gregory and Kit had not very much time together, as he had to leave London to go to Northtowers to join his new regiment. His advent, being the husband of the celebrated Miss Mallinder, caused no little stir in both the garrison and in civilian society, which in Northtowers is mostly clerical.

"You have heard," said the Colonel of the White Horse to his wife on the evening of Gregory's arrival, "that the new man joined to-day?"

"Oh, really ; who is he ? I suppose that's the man in Mr. Drummond's place ?"

"Yes. Seems a nice young fellow. Big and dark, and rather self-contained."

"What is his name ?"

"Alison—Gregory Alison."

"Ah ! Rather a nice name. Not married, of course ?"

The Colonel laughed. "Well, he is and he isn't."

"How ?"

"He is married to Miss Mallinder, the actress."

"Oh, dear !" The lady's tone suggested regimental calamity. "What a pity !" she added.

"Oh, I don't know. Miss Mallinder is not by way of being an ordinary actress—she's a great swell."

"Then she'll expect me to call upon her ?"

"Oh, yes, you'll have to call upon her."

"Such a mistake," said Mrs. Benson, with something approaching to a sniff, "mixing things like this. What did he want to marry an actress for, I wonder ?"

"I suppose, my dear, for the same reason that I wanted to marry you—because he fell in love with her."

"He might have fallen in love with a lady."

"Well, he might. I never heard a breath against her ; I believe she's all right."

"It's a horrid play, Richard," said Mrs. Benson, haughtily.

"Ah, but she is very splendid in it. At all events, she is received in the highest society, and it won't do to snub her in the regiment ; and more particularly will you have to set the example of calling upon her when she comes down here."

"Is she with him ?"

"No ; she can't leave London yet. His father, by the way, is Archdeacon of Westham."

"Perhaps, then," said Mrs. Benson, cheerfully, "she won't be here very much, which will do away with a

great deal of awkwardness. I'm sure people won't know how to take her."

"No, perhaps they won't," said the Colonel, easily. "But they'll go a good bit by what you do, and you'll have to be as nice as you possibly can to her."

"Yes, I suppose I must; but all the same it—oh, well, you know, Richard, it is very awkward and unpalatable, and all that sort of thing."

Meantime Gregory Alison was settling down in his new quarters. It was detestable to him to find himself in barracks again. His two cramped little rooms, after the flat in the Belvedere and his bungalow in India, seemed to choke him; and he had got used to Kit's easy, gracious ways, to her bright and artistic presence, and to the curious sense of space which a house conducted on the lines of the Belvedere always gives. It was horribly lonely, too. He liked the look of his new brother officers well enough, and apparently they did as much by him; but it was a poor substitute for Kit, with her charming smile, her coquettish, dainty ways, and the endless interests of the life which she led.

He lay awake for a long time, feeling that he should never get reconciled to this half-life; but in the end he fell asleep, and he slept as young men in the prime of life who have no money troubles usually do. And in the morning he awoke, feeling, in spite of his forebodings of the previous evening, as gay and as light-hearted as he had ever felt in all his life. He looked round his quarters, saw by the morning light that they would not be, as he put it, "half bad" when he had had time to do them up according to his fancy, and concluded that, since he had to be parted from Kit, he would be as comfortable in the White Horse as ever he had been in his old regiment. After the voyage home, and the long spell of leave, it was pleasant to him to be back in harness again. Somehow that morning he seemed to be nearer to Kit

than he had been since that memorable night that he had seen her in the part of Prudence Pasturell. He understood more her feeling in clinging to her work; he seemed, as I said, to be nearer to her.

“Did I understand you, Alison,” said one of his new comrades to him during the course of the day, “that Miss Mallinder is your wife?”

“Yes, she is.”

“And of course she cannot come down here because she cannot leave London? Will she come here at all?”

“I think it is very likely when she has a holiday—unless I happen to be on leave.”

“I see.” Then his questioner looked at him curiously. “If I may say something infernally cheeky,” he said, “you’ve been in India for some years?”

“Yes.”

“How the devil did you manage to persuade Miss Mallinder to marry you? I mean that you only came back from India a few weeks ago.”

“I know; but I have been married to Miss Mallinder for more than three years.”

“By Jove, you don’t say so—you don’t say so! Then you knew her before you went out?”

“My dear fellow,” said Gregory, “I have known my wife all her life; we were children together. She is some years younger than I am, and I have known her ever since she could walk.”

“Oh, that accounts for it. Well, by Jove, you’re a lucky fellow! I wish I were in your shoes.”

The news spread through the neighbourhood like wild-fire that the officer who had exchanged with Mr. Drummond was married to Miss Mallinder, the actress. At first Gregory liked the distinction; then it got to be a little irksome to him. So many people asked him when his wife was likely to come to Northtowers, whether she was likely to come, and all sorts of questions were put to

him which in other times he would have believed were impossible to be asked of a man concerning himself and his wife. He found himself in a measure neither fish, flesh, nor good red herring. He was married, but his wife was not with him ; so that he did not receive the attention usually paid to a bachelor, and he did not have the standing which accrues to a man keeping up ever so modest an establishment. He was a thing apart—a something in between ; and from one or two things which were let drop in the course of conversation, he gathered that half the world believed that although he was married to the great actress, they were not on anything like good terms with each other. Therefore, as soon as “Prudence Pasturell” came to an end, which was during the month of February, he insisted upon her joining him at North-towers.

“You have had a very long spell of extremely hard work,” he wrote to her, “and you ought to bargain for at least a month of absolute rest before you think of anything else. We give our ball on the sixteenth of February, and if you can come here for that, it would be a good means of introducing you to the best people here. I will take a suite of rooms at the Golden Eagle Hotel, where I am sure you would be as comfortable as you could be anywhere—quite as comfortable as you could be in your own house.”

In reply Kit wrote back :

“We close on the eighth, and I shall be able to come down the next day if you like. I think the idea is very good to take a suite of rooms at an hotel, as if you troubled with a furnished house we should have such a bother with servants for so short a time. I shall, of course, bring Maitland with me, as she is absolutely necessary to my comfort and enjoyment. Don’t do anything, dear boy,

to make the rooms look smart ; I will bring you a box of my own things."

Accordingly, on the ninth of February the great actress arrived at the Golden Eagle, Northtowers, that quaintest of quaint cathedral cities, where the clerical element is so strong that it swamps all others, and where cliques flourish even more than they do in the older city of Blankhampton.

"I met a lady with Captain Alison to-day," said Mrs. Benson to her Colonel on the day following Kit's arrival, "but I don't think it could have been his wife."

"Why not?"

"Because she looked so quiet and unpretending. She had a little, simple, dove-coloured frock on, and a plain sealskin coat, and a quite ordinary black hat ; very good feathers, and all that sort of thing, but still, most simple and quiet and unassuming. That couldn't have been Mrs. Alison."

"It was," said the Colonel. "I met them together, and he stopped and introduced me."

"That the great actress !" cried Mrs. Benson, in astonishment.

"Well, my dear," said the Colonel, "you didn't expect her to come dressed as Lady Macbeth, did you, with all her war paint on?"

"She hadn't any paint on."

"No, she hadn't ; I took particular notice of it. And, by Jove, with a complexion like hers, she didn't want any !"

"What is she like to speak to?" Mrs. Benson asked, not following the subject of Kit's complexion any further.

"Oh, charming. Very quiet and simple ; absolutely unassuming. I think you'll like her. I told her, of course, that you would call upon her in the course of a day or two. She was very sweet about it, and said she

should be charmed to see you, and hoped that she wouldn't miss you ; in fact, she could not possibly have been more charming."

"Oh, very well, then I will go to-morrow and get it over."

It was in this spirit that the Colonel's wife went to show due civility to Miss Mallinder, the actress ; and from the moment that she entered the room until she left it, Kit was perfectly conscious that such was her spirit ; and what was much more to the point was the fact that Gregory himself was also painfully aware of Mrs. Benson's mental attitude towards his wife. It was not so much what she said, as the way in which she said it ; a certain ineffable superiority of tone and manner which almost amounted to condescension served to ruffle him, as certainly Mrs. Benson had no desire or wish to do.

"What do you think of her?" he asked, abruptly, as the door closed behind her and the Colonel.

"Not very much," said Kit. "She's not interesting."

"Interesting? No, I don't know that she is ; but she is, of course, the leading lady in the regiment."

"I should quite think so," said Kit.

"Why? How do you mean?"

"Well, dear, she was rather leading ladyish, wasn't she?—condescending to a degree. Is she like that to all the other officers' wives?"

"I don't know. I never noticed her with any of them. I don't think she's particularly well liked."

"Oh, I see. Well, we shall not see much of her, shall we?"

"I suppose they'll ask us to dinner, and we shall have to ask them back again."

"Oh ! Will they all ask us to dinner?"

"It will look very queer if they don't."

"I see. A little tedious, don't you think, Greg dear, if she talks as she talked this afternoon?"

“To tell you the truth,” he burst out, vexedly, “I think she was horrid.”

“Yes, I think she was rather horrid, too. But he is all right—the Colonel, I mean.”

“Oh, yes, he’s all right—I like him.”

The words were hardly out of his mouth when another visitor was shown in. This was a very young lady—the wife of one of the youngest officers in the regiment.

“I met the Colonel’s wife,” she began, holding out her hand to Kit, and not waiting for any introduction.

“I met her ; she’s been to shed the light of her countenance upon you. She isn’t a bad sort, but she’s so eaten alive with the fact that she is the Colonel’s wife. Do you know, Mrs. Alison, I didn’t believe you were really coming ! When we heard that Captain Alison’s wife was Miss Mallinder, we quite thought that you would never come to a little place like Northtowers. It’s so dull ; such a lot of black coats—they swarm all over the place. And, upon my word, there is only one in the whole of them that is worth going to have a cup of tea with.”

“And who is that ?” asked Kit.

“Oh, those are the Dallases. She’s a good little woman, who never ought to have married a parson ; and he’s a good sort, too, an awfully nice man ; but all the rest—such a humdrum lot !”

“But there are the county,” said Kit.

Mrs. Norton opened her eyes wide. “The county ?” she said. “Yes ; but I must say that we personally have not found the county cordial. They ask us to garden parties and things, and sometimes to dinners ; but they all live a long way out, and—oh, it is a wretched station, it really is.”

“I have always heard Northtowers called such an extremely good station, Mrs. Norton,” said Gregory. “Hunting is awfully good, and there is plenty of shooting.”

“Yes, I daresay it is good as places go ; but I lived all my life in London—when we were not in Paris—and truly I do find it wretchedly dull and miserable here, and all these old county fossils don’t amuse me at all.”

At this point Kit delivered herself of a remark which caused her visitor’s eyes to open to their widest degree.

“If you have not been used to county people,” she said, simply, “I think you would find them exceptionally dull. You have got to live in the country before you thoroughly understand country ways. Now, Gregory and I, from the time we can remember anything, were always in the country, and ways that to us are perfectly natural would probably to you be extremely dull. Of course I have not lived in the country for more than five years now, and he has been over three years in India, you know, so that perhaps just now we shall not feel quite to the manner born.”

“Oh, you knew each other a long while ago?”

“Yes, we were children together ; we have known each other all our lives.”

“You don’t say so ! Oh, then, perhaps you won’t mind these old fossils round about, and when you get between two hard-riding old gentlemen, who look upon you as a mere impediment to their conversation, you will feel quite at home.”

“Well, I will try to forgive them,” said Kit ; “they can’t help being what they are.”

During the next few days the pretty sitting-room in the Golden Eagle Hotel was kept well filled with callers. They came in shoals. All sorts and conditions of people, sympathetic and unsympathetic, some trying to suit their manners to their supposed company—and succeeding badly—and others trying to impress Kit with the honour which they were conferring upon her in coming at all. One clergyman arrived without his wife to ask Kit to

read at a forthcoming parish tea, and was very much hurt that Kit flatly refused to do anything of the kind.

“Such an opportunity of doing good,” he reminded her, with no little severity of tone and voice; “and I should have thought that, for once, you would have been pleased to give enjoyment in an innocent manner.”

“I never give it in any other manner,” said Kit, very sweetly; “but, you see, I am not allowed to give any performance in public, as I am under engagement to Mr. Callaghan, my manager. And of course you must know that I have been working very hard of late, and that I am here with my husband for a little rest—which I have earned, I assure you; and I am sure there must be so much local talent that you cannot need my poor services.”

“We have a great deal of local talent,” said the good gentleman, rather loftily. “My wife is a very brilliant pianist, and she always takes the piano on these occasions.”

“Oh, I see. Is she an invalid?”

“An invalid? Oh, dear, no.”

“I thought, perhaps, as she had not come with you to see me, that she might be an invalid,” said Kit, very gently.

At this point Gregory got up hastily and went to the window, where he stood looking out, his broad shoulders shaking visibly. Then the door opened quite unexpectedly and Maitland walked in, announcing the Duchess of Aberdeen.

“My dear girl,” said the Duchess, bustling in with her usual manner of filling the picture completely, “I heard that you were here with your husband. I don’t know that I quite believed it, but I came to see if such good news could really be true.” And then she enfolded Kit in a capacious embrace, and kissed her affectionately on both cheeks.

The clerical gentleman got up in haste and bowed his adieux.

“My wife will have the pleasure of calling upon you very shortly,” he said, in his most suave tones.

“I shall be most charmed to see her,” replied Kit, in dulcet accents. And then, as the door closed behind him, and his retreating footsteps could be heard descending the stairs, she and Gregory looked at one another and went off into smothered fits of laughter.

“Now, what is the joke?” cried the Duchess. “Don’t keep me in the dark, feeling too silly for anything—what is it? Tell me this minute.”

But “this minute” Kit could not tell her, for the best of all reasons, that she had no breath with which to speak.

“Oh, Greg,” she cried at length, when she found her voice, “will there be many more like him? Oh, wasn’t it funny?”

“Funny!” he echoed. “I assure you, Duchess, that when the gentleman mentioned his wife, Kit asked if she was an invalid that she hadn’t come with him. He wanted her help for his concert, but his wife was too great a swell to call upon Kit.”

“Ah, my dear,” said the Duchess, “many are the ideas of that kind that you will come across in the course of your peregrination through life. I was talking to a woman the other day who asked me if Valli was received—Valli!—the greatest prima donna the world has ever known! And is she received? A woman who lives like an empress. And is she received? A woman great to her finger tips!”

“And what did you say, Duchess?”

“I said, ‘Yes, generally, when she takes the trouble to wish people to receive her, which is not often!’”

CHAPTER XX

AUBREY BRANDON'S NEWS

It may as well be confessed at this point that in the character of Captain Alison's wife, Miss Mallinder was a dead failure. She did not wish to do it, but she made hideous mistakes from first to last. On the night of the memorable ball, on the sixteenth of February, she and Gregory dined with the Duchess of Aberdeen, and she spent most of the evening by that great lady's side. She danced a good deal with Gregory and a good deal with Lord Inverness, she forgot a good many people who had called upon her—genuinely and really did not remember them. In London, on the not frequent occasions when she showed herself in society, it was the habit of most people to recall to her when and how they had become acquainted. "Dear Miss Mallinder, you remember meeting me at Lady Zephyr's, don't you?" And then Miss Mallinder, who had to her knowledge never seen the lady or gentleman before, would say, "Oh, yes, Lady Zephyr's—oh, yes, I remember quite well—what a charming party that was!" And the devoted admirer would go away, feeling that of all persons in the world Miss Mallinder had retained his or her image indelibly upon her memory. But in Northtowers nobody aided her in any such manner.

"I don't believe you know who I am," said one irate lady, who had reproached her for not calling upon her.

"I—I—I don't remember your name at this moment," stammered Kit, taken aback by this unexpected form of attack.

"Horrid stuck-up little minx, giving herself airs be-

cause the Duchess chooses to take notice of her !” was the lady’s after comment. “I shall not call upon her any more !”

“Greg, my dear,” said Kit, when several more equally unfortunate conversations had taken place, “the sooner I go back to London the better, because as a society person in a place like this I am clean out of it.”

“Nonsense !”

“I am. I can’t remember who all these good ladies are—they’re all elderly, they all have daughters, and they mostly go to balls in lace caps ; beyond that I cannot distinguish them.”

“I don’t see how you can be expected to distinguish them when the whole town has swooped down upon you,” said the Duchess, indignantly. “They all know who you are ; you have a distinctive personality of your own ; nobody is likely to forget you, and everybody knew whom they were going to see when they called upon you. But you, poor little child that you are, have had dozens of strange people to see you ; and to see women at this time of year in tall bonnets and great hats, with feathers and flowers and fur things up to their ears, and then to see them with next to nothing on, and in a ball-room, is not a fair test. Why, you haven’t even had time to return your calls and see them at their own domiciles ; that at least would give you some sort of a clue to their separate personalities.”

The Duchess herself thought that she had disposed of the matter quite cleverly, but those who felt that they had stretched a point in calling upon an actress did not look at the situation in quite the same light, and many were the rebuffs during the next few days which Kit and her husband received.

“This is a dreadful place, Gregory,” she remarked, as they came out from their fourth afternoon call. “These people won’t all ask us to dinner, dear?”

“Well, they probably will ; but we are not obliged to go if you don’t wish to.”

“Think of spending one’s precious holiday in calling on people like these, who all sniff at me and think they’ve done me an honour in admitting me into their virtuous homes—not even the Duchess has gilded me !”

“I am afraid that the Duchess has done you more harm than good, my child ; she is too intimate with you.”

“Yes. But we might refuse most of their dinner invitations, mightn’t we, and have most of our time to ourselves?”

“So I asked her to dinner,” said a leader of society in Northtowers. “I actually went the length of asking her to dinner, and she refused, with the excuse of a previous invitation ; and, if you will believe me, they were at the theatre that night ! It just shows that such people cannot stand anything like decent society—they can’t exist away from the theatrical atmosphere.”

“The Duchess was with them,” said a by-stander.

“That makes no difference.”

“They might have had an engagement with the Duchess.”

“They might, but I gave them ten days’ notice. I would have made it longer, only they said that her time was so short. Oh ! I think she’s a horrid little stuck-up minx. As for the Duchess—she is a quantity that one can never depend upon. She thinks it smart to know these people, and so puts them out of conceit with everyone else, and makes them intolerable to all the rest of the world with their airs and graces.”

“Well, I don’t know that anybody particularly wants her society in Northtowers. Northtowers existed before Miss Mallinder came here,” said the by-stander, who was secretly not a little pleased that the leader of society had received something in the nature of a snub.

The by-stander was, however, a woman who liked to get to the bottom of things ; and the first time that she found herself in Mrs. Gregory Alison's society she sounded her as to her frequent refusals of the invitations she had received since she had been staying in North-towers.

"Is it that you don't care about going out," she asked, "or that you find provincial society very dull after the gaieties of London?"

Kit laughed.

"The gaieties of London to me, Mrs. Saville," she said, smiling, "consist in playing an exhausting part every night, not being able to call my soul my own, not being able to go anywhere to please myself, having always to consider everything that I eat and drink and wear with a severity of rule which can only be likened to a rod of iron. The gaieties of London and I have little—almost nothing—to say to one another. An actress with a heavy part on her hands has no time for society. I know a few people well enough for them to come to see me sometimes in the afternoons, and occasionally—very occasionally—I go out to lunch. The only time I can ever dine out is on Sunday night, and I do not accept a tenth of my invitations to do that."

"But you don't go out here much, and you have been asked a great deal, if what I hear is true."

"It is very hard work going out," said Kit ; "and when one has come for a rest, for a holiday—oh ! don't think me ungrateful, Mrs. Saville, but to go out among strangers, all people expecting one to live up to one's little bit of name—it is very hard work. Don't you realise that it must be so?"

"I? I think you'd be a perfect fool to go out any more than you do ; but, of course, other people don't see things in that way, especially people who have invited you, meaning every civility."

"But I had three dinner invitations for to-night," said Kit.

"I daresay you had. You are not going to any of them, I suppose?"

"No, I'm not. I'm not going to either of them. I—I don't feel like going out anywhere, and I shall only be here a little while longer, and I hope people will excuse me."

Her excuse was lame enough, and lamely enough given. Mrs. Saville laughed outright.

"I think people would forgive you, my dear, if you had not made such an awful friend of the Duchess. You see, she is a power here—you don't mind my telling you this, do you?—and people are a bit mad that you should refuse them almost everything and be seen often about with a woman that they can't get hold of at any price. She gives a garden party in July, to which she asks such an *omnium gatherum* that it is really no distinction to be asked—rather the contrary; and young Lord Inverness is always about with you, and of course, poor things, they don't quite like it, because he takes good care that he never is seen about with any of them or their belongings."


"But I knew the Duchess ages ago; I know her intimately."

"Oh, you knew her before you came here?"

"Ages since—years ago!" exclaimed Kit, rather crossly. "She came to see me when I was playing 'Buttercups and Daisies,' before I played Juliet, and I have been on the most intimate terms with her ever since. Did they think that I picked up the Duchess here?"

"Yes, of course they did."

"Then they made a mistake. I know the Duchess very well. I think it's horrid of people, when I came down just for a little while to see my husband, that they cannot leave me alone to enjoy a holiday in my own way.



If they knew what a life of work I have, they would not interfere with me. I don't interfere with them, and I wish they would not interfere with me! I will never come to Northtowers any more; I will tell Gregory so. The next time I have a holiday, if he has not leave, I will take a house five miles out in the country—that I will."

"But you mustn't be vexed with me for telling you—you wanted to know the lay of the land, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes; but I do think it's downright unkind of people to have gone on like this, don't you?"

"Well, I do, my dear, since you put it in that way—yes, I do. But they don't mean to be unkind."

Still, it must be confessed that Kit was a failure as a social force in the old cathedral town of Northtowers, and when she had gone back to London her husband was made to feel it. The last two days of her stay in Northtowers she spent driving round with Gregory, leaving P.P.C. cards on everybody.

"Is it necessary?" she asked.

"Well, it is necessary," he replied.

"Oh! It does seem hard, when I only came here for a month, that I should have to waste my time calling upon people!"

"Yes, dear; but leaving your cards is not exactly calling upon people. You may as well be driving round from one house to another as be driving in the country with me; and Hills will get down and shove them into the various houses, so that you really need not distress yourself about it. But I know what it will be if you don't do it. They'll think, not that you left it undone because you wouldn't take the trouble, or because people had bored you so intolerably, but that it was because you didn't know any better."

"I don't know," said Kit, "that I do know any better!"

"Which is nonsense," he said, with a laugh. "Nobody knows better than you do the right way up of everything."

So she was persuaded to leave the town in a manner conforming to the strictest rules of etiquette. Gregory had obtained a few days' leave, and went to town with her. Her sigh of relief as the train glided away from the platform struck him like an icy blast.

"There," she said, "we are off at last! Oh, dear, but that is a dreadful place. I do hope you will soon get moved on somewhere else."

He turned and looked at her, taking her hand in his.

"Are you so glad to get away from me?" he asked, reproachfully.

"From you! Oh, dear Gregory, how can you put it like that? Not from you, dearest, but from all that lot of people who eyed one as though one were something from another world, or a creature out of the streets, or the gutter; those awful people who always suspected one of something! I am sure, Greg, that their own inner lives must be very bad, or they would never be so suspicious of other people!"

She was very gay as the train sped along.

"You have ten precious days," she said. "We will go to a different theatre every night, and I think we will dine at a fresh place every night; it gives one variety, and it is good for one's digestion to make little changes—of that I am quite certain. And in the daytime—well, in the daytime we will go somewhere every day, somewhere fresh every day, even though it is not very far away. Half the places that people go to round London I have never seen, because I would not go without you. Now, I have never been down to Richmond—oh, you may look, but it is true!"

"But, my dear child, you wouldn't go to Richmond in March, would you?"

“Oh, I forgot that! Well, we will do seasonable things, but we will do things.”

They arrived in town in time to dress comfortably, dine, and go to a theatre. Kit attracted the usual amount of attention, and for once Gregory Alison forgot to be annoyed thereat. To hold her little court between the acts came as naturally to Kit as it had been unnatural to try to accommodate herself to the exigencies of North-towers society. I do not uphold her; indeed, I may go further, and say that I consider her greatly wanting in policy that she did not contrive the better to ingratiate herself with those among whom her husband's lines were cast for the time. In all walks of life it is wise to be gracious; graciousness may be said to cost little and to buy much.

She was very gay and delightful in herself that evening, and Gregory could not help being touched to notice how much pleasure her freedom from the trammels of dull social life seemed to give her. The play to which they went was not a very good one. The principal actress was stagey and irritating; as a matter of fact, she was a novice trained to take a heavy and responsible part by the whim of an admiring playwright, whose personal esteem had for once got the better of his dramatic judgment. Everything that she did was unnatural. She had no freedom of gesture, she gave the idea of doing nothing on her own account. It was as if every movement was the result of a lesson.

“I wonder,” said Kit, at last, “whether my Juliet was anything like this?”

“If your Juliet had been anything like this,” said Gregory, promptly, “you would not be earning sixty pounds a week at the present moment. That young lady will never earn sixty pounds a week, nor, if I were her manager, sixty pence. How any manager could sit at the front—and I presume managers do sit at the front

and watch the progress of the rehearsals—and allow her to display such a pair of feet by such an extraordinary short skirt is quite beyond me. Some day, if ever I have money enough, I think I shall chuck the Service and take to theatrical management myself.”

“And if ever you do,” said Kit, “I will be your leading lady. But you must not think that you will get me for nothing. No, no ; I must have my sixty pounds a week just the same—and perhaps more.”

“That will depend, my dear, upon what you prove yourself to be worth,” said he.

She looked at him with the dawning of a new idea upon her bright face.

“Many a true word is spoken in jest,” she said, “and it is not at all beyond the bounds of possibility that you and I may one day run a theatre of our own. Of course, I am booked for the next few months, but if I were you I would think that scheme thoroughly over, and keep it in my mind. You cannot want to go on living such a narrow boring life as they live down in a place like North-towers—nothing but scandal, malace, envy, and hatred from week’s end to week’s end, endless afternoon calls, paid turn and turn about, deadly dull dinner parties where you meet the same people, in the same dresses, with the same weary faces, night after night. If I lived in such a place as Northtowers for a continuance, I would buy a little black frock, and when that was worn out I would buy another little black frock, and when that was done with I would build another on the same pattern ; and by that time you would go to a new station and it would be like a new frock, and it would be cheap, only, dear old boy, one’s ideas would be like the frock, always cut on the same pattern—never anything greater, never anything less. Did the Duchess speak to you, or didn’t the Duchess speak to you? Will the Colonel’s wife condescend to come to your tea-party, or will she give one

without inviting you to it? Oh, what a dreadful life! And their too dreadful calls—little rounds of visiting, like so many hours a day on the treadmill! Oh, here's Mr. Brandon," she said, as a knock sounded on the door of the box and it was pushed open. "Well, what is the news with you, Mr. Brandon?"

"My dear Miss Mallinder," said he, very gravely, "I went to the Belvedere to find you. They told me you were here, so I knew that you had not heard the news, and I followed you on here."

"Why, what has happened?"

He took hold of her hand and laid his other over it.

"My dear girl," he said, "I am afraid that I am going to give you a dreadful shock. Lawrence Callaghan died an hour ago!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE NEW MANAGERESS

WHEN Aubrey Brandon uttered these words—"Lawrence Callaghan died an hour ago"—Kit rose to her feet and stood looking at him with a vague uncertainty in her eyes.

"I don't think," she began—then broke off short. "What did you say?"

"I scarcely know what I did say," he replied; "I can only tell you that poor Lawrence Callaghan is dead. I happened to be dining with him to talk over some little changes in the new play. We were sitting together, smoking quietly and talking shop, when he gave a sort of gasp and clutched at his heart. He was gone before I could ring the bell for his wife."

She continued to stare at him blankly.

“Is it a joke?” she said at last.

“A joke? No, my dear girl, it is true.”

“And he is dead?”

“Yes, he was gone in a minute.”

Then Kit looked round at her husband.

“I should like to go to her,” she said, in a vague, expressionless kind of voice.

“I will take you,” he said, willingly.

And then she made a step towards the door of the box, where she stumbled and fell in a dead faint upon the floor.

“Get some water and some brandy ; you should have told her more gently,” said Gregory, sharply.

He raised her in his arms and carried her into the corridor. Aubrey Brandon, with a face like a sheet, rushed away in search of restoratives, and between them they presently got her into a private part of the house. By the time she came round she was utterly unfit to do anything but go to her bed, but she persisted that she must go there and then and see Mrs. Callaghan ; so a cab was called, and Gregory helped her into it, and, together with Aubrey Brandon, they drove to the house of mourning. They were admitted instantly. The poor little widow was outwardly composed and calm, frozen by dumb grief. She allowed Kit to hold her hand, and together the two women went into the study, where the dead man was still lying stretched upon the sofa where they had first laid him.

From that moment Kit's life was changed. There was one more theatre in the market, and one more successful playwright open to new arrangements. Aubrey Brandon offered, in his distress and his desire to do his best for his friend's widow, to produce the new play exactly as if Lawrence Callaghan were still living. But Mrs. Callaghan, who had been on the stage before her marriage, preferred

not to risk any of the money which her husband had left behind on theatrical ventures.

“No, Mr. Brandon,” she said, a day or two after the funeral, “it is awfully kind of you, and of Miss Mallinder, too, but I won’t risk any of poor Lawrence’s money by trying to make more of it. I’ve got my two little children to consider ; there will be at least six hundred a year, and that is ample for them, and for me too. I should never forgive myself if I went in for a venture which did not turn out well, and Mr. Lavender has promised to be their trustee, and never one penny will I touch. I hate acting, and I hate having anything to do with theatres ; and since there isn’t Laurie’s head to manage, I would rather do on smaller means. It is no pleasure to me to live in a great big house. I shall go back to the country and do the best I can for the children on what he has left me. I cannot thank either of you enough for offering to stand by me, but I feel that I am doing the best as it is. Thank you again and again for all your kindness and goodness to me—both of you.”

So the little woman passed away out of the theatrical world, and Aubrey Brandon and Kit felt that they had done their best to stand by their comrade’s widow to the fullest extent that lay in their power. Her decision left them entire freedom.

“If you will take my advice,” said Gregory Alison to his wife, “you will have at least six months’ absolute rest.”

“I don’t think,” she answered seriously to this, “that it would be at all wise. People would say that I had been dependent upon Lawrence Callaghan’s management, and that really was not so. It was I who kept the theatre going, I and the play, not so much Lawrence Callaghan’s clever management, excepting in that he secured us two. I won’t decide anything without your concurrence, Greg, but the wisest thing that I can do now is to ask Philip Lavender to advise me in any special chance that may

turn up. He has such a wise head, and he is so far-seeing and clear-sighted, he will be able to advise me better than you, because he understands the ropes as nobody not in the profession could possibly do."

To this Gregory Alison agreed, because he knew that the idea was a good one, and he knew, moreover, that Philip Lavender's advice would be the very best that she could possibly seek.

She had many offers during the next few weeks. Her idea was, of course, to go with the new play ; the part had been specially written for her, and was one in which she was likely to make a great sensation of a different character to that which she had won by creating the part of Prudence Pasturell. At last Aubrey Brandon came to her with a proposal. She received a note from him asking her to give him an appointment as early as possible. "I have an idea," he said, "which I think is worth your consideration, and I should like you to hear it before I disclose it to anybody else."

She replied immediately, giving him an early appointment, and the following morning he came to her at the Belvedere.

"I have been thinking," he said, "over what we can best do now that poor Callaghan is no longer with us. The profits of 'Prudence Pasturell' were enormous. What if you and I were to join forces and manage the theatre between us? I believe that the new play will be a far greater success than 'Prudence Pasturell ;' there is more human nature in it ; your part is a more powerful one."

"We should want a lot of money," she said.

"Lawrence Callaghan had not much money—he borrowed money when he took the theatre. I was entirely in his confidence at the time. He has left his wife and children comfortably provided for ; nothing, of course, to what he would have made had he lived, but still a

comfortable provision. I have not altered my style of living, or very little, since we brought out 'Prudence.' I don't feel inclined to risk all that I have made, but I don't mind going halves if you are not afraid to go in with me."

For a moment Kit did not speak.

"I cannot do anything," she said, "without consulting my husband. I have made a good deal of money, and I have not spent very much of it, but, at the same time, for me it is a greater risk than for you."

"But you would have equal shares with me, and there is no earthly reason why we should not succeed," he explained.

"Yes, that is so ; and yet I feel that it is a risk. I must talk to Gregory about it. I should not like to decide anything quite of my own judgment."

The result of this conversation was that the following day Kit went down to Northtowers, merely telegraphing the fact of her coming a few minutes before the train left London. And Gregory, it must be confessed, looked very grave at the scheme which she proposed to him.

"I don't know, I am sure," he said, when she had unfolded all Aubrey Brandon's ideas ; "it is one thing to have a wife an actress, it is quite another to have a wife who is in business on her own account. What does Lavender say about it?"

"I have not been to him."

"Oh ! I thought you set such store by his judgment."

"I do, so far as people and plays go, but when it comes to starting a theatre—well, you wouldn't exactly go and take advice of another manager, would you?"

"I don't see why not. I should say he was exactly the person you ought to go and take advice of. I don't know whose advice would be better."

"Well, perhaps yours would."

"Little Kit," he said at last, when they had dined,

and he had heard it all over again, "you have not told me everything that is in your mind. You came down here with another idea altogether."

"Well, yes, I did. What I feel is this, Greg. Do you remember what you said when we were in town together the other day, that one day, when you had money enough, you would chuck the Service, and go into the theatrical management yourself?"

"Oh! So now the cat is out of the bag, is it? You want me to throw up my commission, chuck the Service, and go in for managing a theatre, do you? And how do you know, I should be of any use in a theatre?"

"In this way," she said. "I find my business behind the footlights. I must either have ten times the business head I have, or else I must find some very trustworthy person who will consider my interests before all the rest of the world. Now, I ask you, Greg, whether I have got the business head to be on both sides of the footlights at one and the same time, or whether you know any person who will absolutely consider my interests before his own or any one else's. If you were that person I should have no fear but that you would look well after our interests; you would do for us what you would not dream of doing for anybody else in the world. That is common sense, is it not?"

"I suppose it is, and if I had all the money and could go into management as the chief of the whole affair independently of you—well, I don't say that it would not be an excellent scheme. But you are not asking me to do that. You are asking me to go in as your steward. I don't feel inclined to do that. In my regiment I have my own status; there is not much money to be made out of it, it is true, but the status is one which carries its position with it. I should have no position as your manager. I don't know the ropes; I have not graduated in the dramatic profession; there is not the slightest

chance of making an actor out of me, and I think I should be an arrant fool to give up a profession which suits me, the one for which I have been educated, to go in for one of which I am totally ignorant, and I should mull the whole thing in every way. Have you any other alternative?"

"So far as this opportunity is concerned," said Kit, "I have only the alternative of going in as a partner with Aubrey Brandon, and doing the best that I can, or going to another theatre and being precisely where I was."

"What sort of a fellow is Brandon?"

"You have seen him!"

"No, dear, I didn't mean in that way; I mean, what sort of a man is he? What sort of a reputation has he? I mean, is he a straight man? Is he a gentleman?"

"Oh, yes, I have always thought of him as being as straight as a die. But, Greg, don't you think you could see your way to joining me? It is horrid to have you down here and I up yonder."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I don't," he replied. "You see, I have always had my own position, and I have not enough money of my own to let my own place in the world absolutely slide."

"I cannot see your objection," she said, vexedly. "If you become joint manager with Aubrey Brandon, you would pay me my sixty pounds a week exactly as Lawrence Callaghan did, and all the profits outside that you would halve with him. You would be as absolutely your own master as you are now."

"No," he said, doggedly; "I should have no place in the world but as your husband, and I—I couldn't stand it. Besides, I want to have a command in time. I gave up the old regiment for you—that was bitter enough. You married a soldier, my dear, and I am afraid a soldier I shall be to the end of the chapter, and nothing more."

What do I know about theatres? My only instinct of running a theatre would be to say to everybody I met, 'Come and see the show to-night—charmed to send you a box ;' and when they go there, 'Come and have a drink with me.' I am not the kind of stuff that successful managers are made of ; I should ruin you in next to no time. No, I will tell you what I will do, Kit. You go in with Brandon—I believe he is a good sort of fellow—and I will come up for every day of leave I can scrape together, and I will put my lawyers on to backing you up, and I will look at your books and all that sort of thing as much as ever you like. I wonder," he added, reflectively, pulling hard at his pipe, "I wonder whether theatrical accounts are worse than regimental accounts. By Jove, they can't be !"

She sighed. She was vexed and disappointed ; yet she had hardly dared to hope for anything else. Perhaps it was a great deal to ask of a man, that he should give up his profession—the profession of his choice, the aim in life to which he had always pressed—and yet there seemed so little to gain ! She was not mercenary, but it seemed to her that he was hanging on for the chance of being killed and little else. Failing that contingency, he was pressing forward for the chance of commanding his regiment. But that would not be a continuance ; command he never so wisely, it would be an affair of five years at most—always in what seemed to her a position of slavery. Even as commanding officer he could not be absent for a day without leave—he must always be under somebody else. Here was a chance of being for ever his own master.

"You don't seem to see," she cried, "that you would not only be absolutely your own master if you take this chance, but you would be absolutely mine—you would pay me my salary !"

"I shouldn't like it," he replied. "I shouldn't be

able to jacket you if I wanted to. And I should exist only as Miss Mallinder's husband. I couldn't stand it, Kit, and that's the truth."

"I thought you loved me better," she said, in a voice which was ominously tremulous.

"I love you well enough," he said, quickly, "nobody could doubt that; but to give up one's own line to rush in blindly where one does not know the road, it would be folly, sweetheart, believe me."

"Would you rather that I did not venture on it?"

"Not at all. I think the general idea is a good one. I will try and get two or three days' leave, and I will go back with you, then I will look into the whole thing. We will put Searchem and Co. onto it, and if there is anything the least little bit shady, you bet they will find it out."

"I don't see how there can be anything shady, because Lawrence Callaghan went in on borrowed money, and he has left his widow about six hundred a year. I cannot tell why Aubrey Brandon does not keep it all for himself. He has plenty of money—he must have made heaps of money out of 'Prudence Pasturell.'"

"I can tell you why he wants you to go in with him—it is to secure you," said Gregory, with a laugh. "I suppose you are still satisfied with the play?"

"Oh, yes, the play is magnificent—far beyond 'Prudence Pasturell.' We shall find a difficulty in getting the principal man's part filled, but Aubrey Brandon has somebody in his eye. Nobody I know—an unknown young man who has been playing in the provinces. Aubrey Brandon says he is magnificent, and until he has made a London success he will not ruin us in price."

So it was agreed between them. If the truth be told, it had been a sorer temptation to Gregory not to refuse her than anything that had before presented itself for his decision; and the cause of his refusal was curiously three-fold. Pride had something to do with it, also want of

confidence in his own powers, and, most strongly of all, there was that curious desire to hold fast to the sword. It was not exactly a desire for glory. If any fighting had come in his way, Gregory Alison would have taken it as a matter of course, and would have rejoiced in it, but he had no thirst for active service—no longing to do great things and win great rewards. No, it was a curious contentment—a satisfaction in the everyday life of small details, a revelling in the grind at which he daily and hourly grumbled, a love of the mess-table, a feeling of at-homeness about his uniform, and, above all, a sense that in his own regiment he was somebody, and in Miss Mallinder's theatre he would, as he put it, give himself away with every moment that went by.

They went up to town together the following afternoon. Gregory had had no difficulty in obtaining a few days' leave, and they spent most of the time in the driest of business consultations. Eventually Kit became joint lessee and manager of the Grosvenor Theatre, Mr. Aubrey Brandon, dramatic author, being her partner.

"Now I hope that you are quite satisfied," said Gregory to her, when they were dining together on the night before he had to return to Northtowers. "You are at the top of the tree now, your own mistress in every sense of the word, and nobody to say yea or nay except your partner, Brandon."

"No," she replied, "I am not altogether satisfied. Satisfied so far as the business side goes, yes; but I should have been happier if you had been the new manager instead of myself."

"Anyway," said he, "we will drink yet once again to the success of the new development. Of course we drank to it last night, but you and I will have a fresh toast on our own account. Here is to Miss Mallinder, the manageress of the Grosvenor Theatre."

She raised her glass and drank the toast in silence. A

certain feeling of foreboding was strongly upon her ; she could ill have defined it, and yet it was there.

“ My dear,” he said, “ you are very *triste* to-night ; I have not often seen you like this. You ought to be happy, for everything lies before you and points to the harbour of success.”

She looked at him for a moment or so without speaking.

“ I feel oppressed,” she said at last ; “ as if I had cast all upon a die and lost. Of course, Greg, if harm comes of this—this new venture, you must never blame me. I was ready and willing—nay, more than willing, I was anxious—to put all power into your hands, to make you in reality my lord and master. You have chosen between your heart and your sword.”

“ No, no ; don’t put it like that !” he cried.

“ I can put it in no other way. So far as money goes this is the greatest crisis of my life ; and a sort of feeling is upon me that the crisis may embrace more than mere money and business.”

CHAPTER XXII

GIFFORD COX

ABOUT a month after the arrangements were made between Aubrey Brandon and Miss Mallinder for continuing the Grosvenor Theatre, the White Horse were moved from Northtowers to Ireland. They had expected to go to Aldershot, which would have suited Gregory Alison to a nicety ; the route, however, when it came, was for the Emerald Isle, and it must be confessed that his first instinct was one of vexation that he had not done as Kit wished, and exchanged the Service for the Theatre. It was, however, too late to make any change without

wishing to confess himself the most changeable and fickle of men ; but none the less the orders for Ireland were but little less unpalatable than would have been the case had they been orders for India.

The new play had been but a partial success. The great part which was to outshine Prudence Pasturell did not appeal to the playgoing public. Of course, with a theatre so well established and an actress of such distinction, the management were sure of keeping the theatre full for a certain time, but at the time when Gregory was due to leave Northtowers for the distressful country, Kit was already deep in the rehearsal of a new production.

It was for both her and Aubrey Brandon a most trying and anxious period, and for the first time Kit was glad that Gregory had not yielded to her wishes and thrown up his commission in order to become one of the managers of the Grosvenor Theatre. She never told a soul what was in her mind, but her thoughts ran something like this : “ If the worst comes to the worst, I am always sure of forty or fifty pounds a week at the very least ; if Gregory has his own place in his regiment, he will be satisfied so long as I keep my dramatic place. If he had failed at this management, he would never have forgiven himself, and would always have blamed himself and fancied that I was blaming him. So it is better as it is ; it has all turned out for the best.”

To Aubrey Brandon she spoke very differently.

“ Look here,” she said, “ perhaps I ought to have told you before my idea—which has never altered—as to the reason why the new play has not succeeded. There is too much ranting for the heroine, and there is too little to do for the hero. It went down once with the public, in ‘ Prudence,’ but what will go down once does not necessarily go down twice. That play is too much on the lines of ‘ Prudence Pasturell,’ without the spice of wickedness which carried everything before it. Now, in

the new play you have practically the same idea—which is all heroine. Can't you write up the man's part?"

"Of course I can."

"And why shouldn't you? With Lawrence Callaghan things were different. He was a good actor, a sound, mediocre, picturesque, melodious person; there wasn't the smallest little trace of genius in him; everything depended upon me, and Lawrence Callaghan was shrewd enough to realise that. But with Gifford Cox you have a man of a totally different stamp. He is full of fire, of electricity brimming over with genius; and he is dawdling about the stage, making eyes at a pretentious little hussy who wants slapping badly."

"You are a wonderful woman," said Aubrey Brandon. "I don't believe there is another woman on the stage who would wish another part than her own to be written up."

"Nonsense! I want to make the theatre go; I want to make money; I want to have a big success; I want to feel the whole play on fire! But you must give the hero something to light his torch with; at present he has nothing; he is like a mute at a funeral."

By dint of a few such conversations, Kit contrived to work her will upon Aubrey Brandon's new play, and Gifford Cox, who could hardly believe his good fortune when he found that the part assigned to him was, by Miss Mallinder's desire, to be written up into a part of the first magnitude, flung himself into his work with an ardour only equal to hers.

"You are magnificent," she cried, "magnificent! This will take London by storm! Don't you see the difference, Aubrey?"

"Of course I see the difference, but I didn't think you would like it like this."

Gifford Cox turned and looked at her, a look of significance which was not lost upon the dramatic author.

"Miss Mallinder is above all such petty considerations as jealousy, Mr. Brandon," said he, quietly.

"I see that she is. I might have known her well enough to make sure of it before. As it is, the play will go like wildfire."

And the play did. By the time that Gregory Alison got settled down in his new quarters, the press was once more ringing with the beauty, the genius, and the success of Miss Mallinder, the actress, and there was also a good deal for the journalist to say about the new actor, Gifford Cox.

Now, it is just a chance whether those associated together in one theatre will remain on what I may call professional terms, or whether they will become intimates apart from the needs of their art. With Aubrey Brandon, although he was her partner, Miss Mallinder never became in the smallest degree intimate or upon any footing other than that of her fellow-manager. For one thing, there was a Mrs. Aubrey Brandon—a lady who had been a soubrette in her youth, and had made more or less mistakes in her matrimonial ventures. Mrs. Aubrey Brandon was a person whom it would have been impossible to invite to a dinner-party. Occasionally Aubrey Brandon lunched with Kit at the Belvedere, when some matter of business necessitated a more private conversation than they usually had in the theatre, but on the rare occasions when Kit gave any form of entertainment, she never included him among her guests. With Gifford Cox it was otherwise. Very soon after the production of "A Harvest of Roses," as the second play, produced under the double management at the Grosvenor, was called, the Duchess of Aberdeen intimated to Kit that she would like to meet him, and such a wish being almost equal to a command, Kit promised to make an early occasion when she might do so.

It happened in "A Harvest of Roses" that there was

a very beautiful scene in which the two principal players had a few minutes when they sat as spectators of a village dance. The stage directions enjoined them to talk interestedly together, and Kit, being artist to her finger-tips, always took this chance of appearing to be showing the deepest interest in her companion. The first time that Gregory got a few days' leave was at the very end of the season. It happened that he had never seen Gifford Cox before. The only time that he had been able to rush up to town to see the play with which they had started management, the part had been played by an understudy, owing to Gifford Cox's indisposition. Kit had not spoken of him specially, and although he had read the reviews which had given him such superb notices, and spoken of him as the coming man, he was not prepared for such a man as he found playing the principal part in "A Harvest of Roses." That night Kit outshone herself. Her part was that of a woman passionately in love with a man who is bound to another—whom she knows to be bound to another; and more than once Gregory found himself watching the progress of the play with clinched hands and fury in his heart, and an irresistible desire stealing over him to jump down upon the stage and try definite conclusions with Gifford Cox as to which of them was the better man.

"Well?" said Kit, when he came round to her dressing-room. "Well?"

"Oh, it is a fine play," he said, unhesitatingly. "Where did you pick up the man?"

"Gifford Cox? Oh, he was a find of Aubrey Brandon's. Isn't he splendid?"

"Yes, I suppose he is. I don't know that I care about that impassioned style myself, but the fellow can act; he's been in the Service, too."

"Oh, you saw that, did you?"

"Of course I saw it. What regiment was he in?"

"I really don't know," said Kit. "I never asked him. I don't see much of him except on the stage. He came to tea the other day to meet the Duchess, otherwise I have not spoken to him half a dozen times."

"Now what," said Gregory, "were you talking about during that dance?"

Kit laughed gaily. "You know, dear," she said, with a long breath, "that is the most difficult thing to do of all that comes into one's life—to pretend that you are deeply interested when you are only making-believe all the time. To tell you the truth, he was saying—to-night—that Hironnelle's Pastilles are nothing but burnt treacle and a little coal tar, with sugar to taste, and a few drops of vanilla just to give them a flavour."

Gregory burst out laughing.

"By Jove, and I might have eaten my head off with jealousy! You looked as if you were planning an elopement at the very least; you looked as if you might have been saying anything."

"Oh, yes, we might have been—but we weren't, dearest. Did you see him look at you?"

"I saw him look out at the house several times."

"Ah, he was looking for you. I told him you were here, and he said he couldn't understand that you didn't give up the Service and take to the stage."

"Is he married?" Gregory asked.

"Upon my word, I don't know. I suppose so—they mostly are; but I never asked him, and he never told me."

She slipped into a voluminous mantle of thin dark silk, profusely trimmed with black lace.

"Now I am ready," she said. "Marguerite, just make quite sure there are no letters for me before I go."

As the woman went out of the room, Gregory caught hold of her.

"So it was all make-believe, was it?" he said, looking down upon her with a passionate light in his eyes.

"Make-believe, Greg ; what do you mean?"

"All that between you and Cox."

She gave a little laugh, half-gay, half-coquettish.

"Make-believe of the make-believest," she answered.

"Did you think, even for a moment, that it was real?"

"Well, I confess that I felt once or twice——"

"As if you would like to break his head!"

"I did."

"That is splendid : because so long as I can make them all think that—and if I can make you think so, it ought to be easy to deceive the general public—that means that the theatre will be full, keep full and brimming over, for as many months as we like to keep open. That is Gifford Cox's great gift—he makes love as if he meant it ; talks to one as if his whole heart was at one's feet, as if his soul was hanging on one's next word ; and all the time he is telling one about Hironnelle's Pastilles ! Anybody can make real love, there is no acting in that, but to make love that looks real and isn't, is genius, worth its weight in gold. Dear old boy, you couldn't have said anything to please me better."

The very next night, however, when the village dance came on, Gifford Cox asked Miss Mallinder a question. The two were seated upon a rustic bench set upon a charming terrace walk which ran at the back of the stage. It was set corner-wise ; so that although they were at the back of the scene they were not very far from the footlights. His part was to draw her in subtle fashion along the terrace, talking as they went, to plainly coax her along, and to draw her to the seat almost against her will.

"I ought not to be here with you," her lines ran.

"No, no, I know it ; but the others are all occupied, they take no heed of us."

And then the music began and the dance on the lower terrace commenced, and the little by-play between the two followed.

“Did the husband like the play?” he asked.

“Oh, yes, of course he did; how could he help himself? He is delighted with it!” she replied.

“Is he here to-night?”

“No, not to-night; he is dining with a man at his Club.”

“If I were your husband, just over for a few days’ leave,” said he, “I should come every night.”

He was holding her hands in his—by the exigencies of the play—and bending very near to her to speak in the usual lover-like fashion. She laughed outright.

“Oh, that would be too foolish,” she cried.

“If I were your husband, I should be foolish,” he persisted.

“Ah, well, well, you are not my husband, and perhaps it is just as well for you. By-the-bye, Mr. Cox,” with a sudden change of tone, “I have never seen your wife. What is she like?”

He held her hands closer. He had to do it in the play, you understand—close up against his breast, and she to smile archly at him, and seem as if his love-making were not wholly distasteful to her. “I have no wife,” he said, roughly, and as he held her hands against his breast she could feel the beating of his heart beneath them.

“What! you are not married? What a pity!”

“The only woman that I ever saw whom I should like to marry is not free.”

And then, before she could reply, he had his cue to continue his part in the play.

“Dearest,” he had to say, rising and drawing her with him along the terrace, “you take too earnest a view of life; it is not all sad; it is not all work and trial and endeavour. There should sometimes be enjoyment——”

“You tempt me! But no, listen, they are coming. Do not betray me.”

She sped away to her dressing-room with a new sensation about her heart-strings. Surely he was only trying to act up to the part; he did not mean those words for her. Oh, no, it was preposterous; she would not think of it again; and for the rest, she would be chilly, dignified, distant. But it is not easy to be chilly and dignified and distant when you have to play a part in which passion takes the lead, and Gifford Cox had never in his life before played as he played that night. It was as if he were playing for the stake of her soul. Again and again they were called before the curtain.

And then, at the end, Aubrey Brandon came round to her dressing-room, and told her that without doubt Gifford Cox was improving day by day.

“Snelson was in the theatre to-night,” he said, vexedly. “For once I wish that he had played worse. Of course Snelson wants him for that new play of Girado’s he is bringing out. Snelson and Girado were together; I could see them laying their heads against one another, and whispering and jotting down things. You’ll see they will get him from us, if it’s possible.”

“Well, let him go,” said Kit. And yet something in her heart said that she did not mean the words, something in her heart told her that no consideration of salary would take Gifford Cox away from the Grosvenor Theatre.

“Let him go!” echoed Aubrey Brandon. “Why, my dear girl, it would be the ruin of the play. Of course he is bound to us, and he is not likely to find a finer part; but if they tempt him with fifty or sixty pounds a week—which they are quite capable of doing—he wouldn’t be human if he did not try to get out of his agreement. Upon one thing we must be agreed, and that is that we cannot let him go for any mere matter of money. I

really think I had better tell him in the morning that we will raise his salary."

"Don't," said Kit; "wait till he hints at it."

Aubrey Brandon looked at her admiringly.

"What a business head you've got," he said.

And Kit sighed, knowing very well that it was not business, but a more personal reason which had kept her from falling in with his ideas.

Not a little to her surprise, Gregory did not come for her that evening. Usually, if he were not in the theatre he was always there at closing time; but on that particular night she only received a note scrawled in pencil;

"Hope you won't mind," it said; "shall not be home just yet. Going on to a show with Mavor."

She thrust the note into her pocket, feeling strangely desolate. Of course she knew that Lord Mavor was a great friend of Gregory's; still, that he should go on anywhere with him without thinking of her struck her with a sense of chill and of pain. Then there was a sharp rap at the door, and Aubrey Brandon came rushing in.

"What did I tell you?" he exclaimed. "I knew what they had come for! I met Wilkins just now with Snelson's card, and a message on it for Cox. Will he go and sup with him at the Savoy!"

"How did you know?" asked Kit.

"Because I read it, of course."

"Oh! Well, I don't think you'll find that he will go, Aubrey; not if we make it worth his while to stay."

"But the great question is," said Aubrey Brandon, "what will make it worth his while? That is the question."

CHAPTER XXIII

UP THE RIVER

KIT and Gregory were dawdling over their breakfast the following morning when Aubrey Brandon arrived in a high state of excitement.

“What did I tell you?” he began. “What did I tell you, Miss Mallinder? What did I tell you?”

“Well?” said Kit.

“Have some breakfast,” said Gregory; “you’re put out a bit. The coffee is excellent and hot; the kidneys are done to a turn and hot.”

“Thank you—yes, I will. I choked down a cup of coffee this morning, and that was all. My worst fears are confirmed.”

“What, has Mr. Cox given notice?”

“No, Mr. Cox has not given notice, but a man I know was supping at the Savoy last night, and he heard Snelson say to Cox, “Sixty pounds a week, my boy, and a first-class——”

“He is quite worth it,” said Kit, pouring herself out some more coffee.

“Worth it!” shrieked the other. “I don’t say he isn’t worth it, but he’s not having it.”

“No, but a man isn’t content to remain for ever getting less than he knows he’s worth; why should he? After all, Mr. Cox has his life to live just as we have. We shall have to give him a big rise. He’s having twenty-five now, isn’t he?”

“Twenty-five—yes.”

“Well, we had better make it fifty.”

“It means twenty-five out of our profits,” groaned Aubrey Brandon.

“Yes, I know it does ; but it will mean perhaps a hundred and twenty-five if he goes elsewhere.”

The day went by, however, and no intimation came from Gifford Cox that he contemplated seceding to the theatre ruled over by one Snelson ; and it was not until the dance scene that anything was said on the subject.

“What is the matter with our friend Brandon, Miss Mallinder?” he asked.

Kit laughed. “He has been very unhappy all day, Mr. Cox.”

“Really ! Poor chap ! He’s been in and out of my dressing-room, and fidgeting around and evidently wanting to say something. What’s the matter with him ?”

“He’s very uneasy in his mind,” said Kit.

“But why ?”

“Because of Mr. Snelson’s visit last night, and of his invitation to you to sup with him, and his offer while you were supping.”

“Good heavens ! How did he know anything about that ?”

“Ill news travels apace,” said Kit.

“Would it be ill news ?” asked he. It was just at the point when he caught her hands and drew them against his breast. “Would it be ill news ?” he repeated.

“It would be the most dire ill news,” answered Kit ; “you must not leave us on any consideration whatever. You had better tell Mr. Brandon of the offer that you have had, and satisfy him that you don’t mean to leave us.”

“Would you prefer that I stayed ?”

“Why, the whole piece hangs upon you !”

“Yes, but personally, I mean ?” And just at that moment, as if to save Kit, he received his cue and rose, drawing her along the terrace with him. “Dearest, you take too earnest a view of life.”

And the next moment Kit was running away to her dressing-room. Once there she sent for Mr. Brandon.

"He told me something just now," she said. "You had better see him as soon as possible and get it settled about his salary."

"And what shall I go to?"

"Oh, double it—double it. It is not a time for haggling."

It was not until the following evening that there was any chance of conversation between them. Then Gifford Cox spoke to her of the new arrangement with Aubrey Brandon.

"He has offered to double my salary," he told her. "What made him do that?"

"Partly because other people were after you, and partly because we feel that you are worth it."

"I was perfectly content to remain where I am," said he.

"You should never be content to remain at the bottom of the ladder," she said, very seriously. "Take my advice—the labourer is worthy of his hire, and an actor should always take success when it offers."

"Oh, I took it, of course, and said, 'Thank you,' but I should never have asked for such a rise. I would rather—I may as well be frank with you—I would rather stop in this theatre and in this part at ten pounds a week than I would go to any other at a hundred."

"You are very foolish," she said; "more foolish than I have words to tell."

He gave a sigh. "Men are foolish," he said; "and the stronger the men the more foolish their folly."

I can scarcely tell you how it came about, but from this time a new feeling arose between Kit and Gifford Cox. The Duchess asked him to dinner, and he foregathered somewhat with Gregory Alison.

"What regiment were you in?" Gregory asked him. "I see that you have been in the Service."

"Did you see that?" said the other, recognising that

Miss Mallinder's husband spoke to him with a certain amount of hauteur, and perhaps a little resenting the tone.

"Yes ; any soldier could see it. What was your regiment?"

"The Twenty-ninth Hussars."

"The Twenty-ninth? I never knew your name as one of them!"

For a moment Gifford Cox looked at Alison in extreme amusement.

"You haven't a good memory, my dear fellow," he said, easily.

"I haven't ; you are right. I have seen you somewhere—if that's what you mean—but I don't place you as being one of the Twenty-ninth."

"No, I don't suppose you do. You might place me, however, as having been part of your life earlier than either of us were in the Service."

"Were you? I don't remember you."

"Oh, yes, you do. I was your fag at Eton."

"By Jove! Is it possible! You don't mean to say that you're little Ted Winnington?"

"I am."

"But how came you to have such a name as Gifford Cox?"

"Well, they are my names. I am Edward Gifford Cox Winnington. I thought the family might object to the holy name of Winnington being desecrated by being put upon a play-bill, and so I dropped it for my middle names, which very few people know that I possess."

"And has nobody spotted you before?"

"Not a soul. You see I don't go into society very much. Acting is not easy work, as you probably know by your wife."

"My wife scarcely goes out at all," said Gregory ; "in fact, she pretty well loathes it. She came down and

stayed a month with me in my quarters not so long ago, and I believe she would just as soon have been a month in prison."

"Ah, I can quite understand that," said Gifford Cox ; "and when you come to think of it, it is preposterous to realise a woman with her gifts and her mind trotting round calling upon all the little provincial nobodies who make society in country quarters. I gave up the Service simply because I could not stand the horrible sameness and dulness of it all, meeting the same men at dinner night after night, hearing the same old jokes, seeing the same brainless horseplay."

"And of course you had leanings in another direction ; you must have had other reasons than mere dislike of soldiering to make you take up the stage?"

"Oh, I had my ambitions, of course. To tell you the truth, I never can understand, with such a wife as yours, that you are content to stay on as a soldier."

Gregory Alison, however, felt that he had cast the die and must abide by his throw. A soldier he was, and a soldier he must remain until the end of the chapter. The atmosphere of the stage was not one which suited him. He had all his life thought of actresses as young ladies of lax morals and much fascination, and the self-denying, almost ascetic life lived by his wife was not one which in any sense appealed to him. He had loathed the part of Prudence Pasturell partly because it preached a sermon which went home more deeply than he was aware of ; he had loathed it, as played by his wife, if the truth be told, far more resentfully than he would have objected to his wife taking part in a burlesque.

And at the end of his leave he went back to his regiment with a certain sensation of relief. He would not have admitted as much even to himself, but it was so, nevertheless. His mind was strangely divided. He was intensely proud of his wife and of her position in the

theatrical world, but at the same time there was always present the feeling that she belonged to another sphere than his. Almost his last words to Kit were about Gifford Cox.

“Of course it is rather a relief,” he said to her, “to know that your leading man is all right in himself. I don’t wonder he didn’t stick to soldiering, because he was always rather a little duffer when he was my fag at Eton. Of course, socially, Lord Winnington’s son is all right, and that is a tremendous pull for you.”

“He would be exactly the same to me if he were a butcher’s son, my dear Gregory,” said Kit, promptly. “In our life we do not mind in the least what people’s belongings are; we look no further than the man or woman. He can act, and that is the principal matter for us to consider.”

Gregory Alison thought of his wife’s words when he found himself back in his own quarters. He wished that she would give up her work and go and live with him. It would perhaps be a pity, as she was making so much money, but she was getting all sorts of ideas in which he could not and would not follow her.

Such rot, his thoughts ran, to pretend that it made no difference to her whether a man was Lord Winnington’s son or the son of a butcher. It only showed how demoralising the stage was. Nobody had such absurd ideas in the army. He hated humbug—nothing so much; and it was absolute humbug for Kit to pretend that she only thought of what people were, and not at all of what they had come from. Why, she had given everybody the cold shoulder at Northtowers, and had chiefly foregathered with the Duchess—little make-believe that she was! He supposed that she had picked up these democratic ideas from men like Brandon, with wives who could not show, and so on. Anyway, since he had to be in Ireland, and she had to be in London, he was glad that

the man with whom she would be most intimately associated should be little Ted Winnington, or, as he had come to be, big Ted Winnington, for the actor who was known as Gifford Cox stood over six feet in his stockings.

It was after that visit of Gregory's that a certain intimacy began to spring up between Miss Mallinder and the gentleman who played the lead in "A Harvest of Roses." They played all through the hot August days; most of the other theatres were closed or empty, but the Americans and the curious people who frequent London during the dog days contrived to keep the Grosvenor full to overflowing.

"You are fagged out," said Gifford Cox one night to Miss Mallinder; "why don't you take a week's holiday and get some sea air? Your understudy could do well enough."

"I hate giving in to my understudy," she said. "I do feel rather done up, but I shall be better after to-night; to-morrow I go down to a dear little cottage that I have taken on the river, and then I shall feel ever so different."

"That's a good idea!" he exclaimed. "A cottage on the river. Are you going to ask any of us to spend a day with you?"

"You can come if you like," she said.

"Where is it?"

"At Hampton Wick, right on the river's bank. Yes, I know I might have gone farther out, but I thought it would be a greater fag getting up and down. Come down and spend Sunday with me."

From going down to spend Sunday with Miss Mallinder at Hampton Wick to starting rooms in a quaint old hostelry at Kingston was but a very easy step, and so, wholly unintentionally, Miss Mallinder and Mr. Gifford Cox generally had to catch the same train—the latest from Waterloo. At first he used to let her get

out alone at her station, where she always took a cab to the charming cottage which she had made her temporary home. Then there came a night when the moon was shining with extra brightness, and he got out and took her to the cottage door—talking of parts and plays all the time, I need hardly tell you—and himself walked the intervening distance which lay between her cottage and the inn at Kingston. And having once broken the ice thus far, it became a regular practice that he should get out at Hampton Wick too, and escort her home before seeking his own lodging. Nobody knew ; nobody in their world would have cared much had they done so.

Miss Mallinder's cottage was secluded, and of the kind which is called *bijou*. She did not show herself much in the frequented parts of the place, and she had contrived by dint of considerable ingenuity to keep her identity from her neighbours, having taken the cottage in the name of Mrs. Alison. Then the two girls from Little Gracethorpe came to stay with her, and as soon as they appeared upon the scene, Mr. Gifford Cox was their most frequent visitor ; indeed, he seemed to be in and out all day long, and apparently Violet Alison was the chief attraction. He played tennis with her, he sat talking to her, he took her on the river, and might be found at her side at almost any time. When the two girls happened to have gone up to a theatre—for being from the country they naturally did not miss the chance of seeing the plays of the hour, when they had it—he always came to the door of their carriage and asked if he could come down with them, though on those nights when Kit was travelling alone he went through no such formality, but opened the door of the carriage and got in as if he had a right to do so.

“ I see you are alone to-night,” he said, on the first of these occasions.

“ Yes, the girls have not been up ; there was nothing

that they particularly wanted to see. I asked them to come up and see the 'Harvest' again, but they are coming up to-morrow night instead. Connie is not very well to-day."

As she spoke she took the window strap in her hand and began to draw up the window.

"Let me do that," said he, taking it from her. Her hand was ungloved, and so was his, and not unnaturally their fingers touched. "Why did you tell me that?" he asked.

"Tell you what?"

"That the—the girls had not come to-night. I don't come in to see them."

"No?" Her tone was but faintly inquiring, but he answered the implied question.

"You know that I do not," he said, letting the window strap fall, and seizing hold of both her hands; "you know perfectly well that those two girls are nothing to me; they don't understand me; they don't attract me; I don't come to see them. It is you—you—you alone who draws me to the cottage; it is you for whom I live; you who are the angel of my heart and the lodestar of my life!"

"Oh, don't say it!"

"I must say it. I have been trying to keep it back for ever so long, but it is no use. Why should I not say it? We have done with the unconventional world, you and I—what are forms and conventions to us? Just as much as your husband's world to you—nothing more."

"You have no right to say this to me!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, I have. I have the right of being—oh, you know what I am—your other soul! If he cared for you as I care, do you think I would ever have spoken? No—ten thousand times no. But what does he care for you? Next to nothing. He thinks more of what the world will say than of the reason why it says it. He stands right

outside your life. And you and I were made for each other !”

“Not at all.”

“Yes, and you cannot deny it. You may deny it with your lips, but you cannot with your heart, you cannot with your eyes—they tell no lies. Do you think, if Alison cared for you as I care, that he would be content to go on living the dreary, dull, monotonous round of petty detail which they call glory? No—a thousand times no !”

“But it is Violet !” she cried.

“Violet ! What is Violet ?”

“Whom you care for—whom you come to see.”

“Yes, she is a very good excuse ; but she is only an excuse, and I won’t pretend to you that it has ever been otherwise.”

“But you cannot mean it,” Kit burst out. “You—you are playing a joke upon me. You are—— Oh, Mr. Cox, believe me that it is no use ! You are making a great mistake. I am absolutely and entirely in love with my husband.”

“And yet a month at Northtowers bored you to extinction, and you want me to believe that you are in love with him ! No, you must tell me some more probable story than that before you meet with credence.”

“Why did you say this ?” she cried. “I never dreamed of anything of the kind. You have seen nothing of me. You have just come down a few times in the train—not very often. You have been coming to my house the last week or two, and spending the whole time with my sister-in-law ; you cannot be in love with me—it is absurd !”

“I was in love with you the first day that I came into your theatre. The first day that we played together I knew that I had never seen such a woman as yourself, and the first time that we rehearsed the terrace scene in ‘A Harvest of Roses’ I knew that, for weal or woe, you

were my fate ; I knew that you were the sun and moon and stars of my very life. You may be set so high up yonder that I can never put out my hand to reach you, but the sun of my life you are, and though you may draw down the grey clouds of separation between us, so that my life is withered for want of the warmth and glory of your sunshine, you are still the sun, the only sun in the heavens for me ! As for you, you are cold, proud, self-denying, and very strong ; you may hold yourself aloof, but you cannot hide from me that you care ; you cannot hide from me the truth, that you have drifted away from Alison as he has drifted away from you !”

CHAPTER XXIV

AN INHERITANCE

As Gifford Cox thus taxed Kit with having drifted away from her husband, the train glided into Hampton Wick station.

“I insist upon your not coming home with me,” she said, putting out a resolute hand and forcing him back onto his seat. “I insist upon it ; I don’t ask you ; I wish to be alone.”

“Let me come with you,” he urged. “It is not fit for you to be alone.”

“Nonsense ; it is as fit as any other time that I have come down alone. I will not have you come with me.”

She jumped out of the carriage and resolutely shut the door, in spite of his attempt to follow her. He let down the window with a jerk, but he was too late ; the train had already started.

“You are not angry?” he cried, leaning out of the carriage window so far as to be apparently within reach of the signal-box at the end of the platform.

She waved her hand imperatively.

“Go back!” she cried. “The wall, the wall!”

He drew his head in just in time to avoid a smash, which would certainly have brought his career and this part of my story to a close, and Kit staggered back, sick with the narrowness of his escape.

“That was what you might call touch and go, lady,” was the remark of a porter who had been standing by. “They gents by the late train, they take no ’eed of bricks and mortar, nor moving trains, nor any of the things that travellers is mostly a bit careful of. It strikes me the gent just took ’is ’ead in in the nick of time. There’s plenty of room, but when gents lean out by the yard they can reach most anything.”

“Oh,” said Kit, with a shudder, “it was horribly near!”

“It was, lady; it was as near a thing as ever I see. Do you want a cab, lady?”

“Yes, thank you.”

She was so overcome that he took her by the arm and piloted her to where a couple of cabs were awaiting the chance of a fare.

“There, I think you’ll be all right now, lady; and, after all, a miss is as good as a mile,” was the comforting remark of the porter, as he shut the door upon her.

She gave him a shilling, and tried to smile her thanks for his gallantry. He looked at the shilling in his hand as the cab lumbered away. “It was lucky for ’im,” his thoughts ran, “that ’e took ’is ’ead in when ’e did, for she would always have thought it was ’er fault for not ’avin’ let ’im get out with ’er when he wanted to. Lor’, I wonder if she knows ’im. I fancy I’ve seen ’em together; I fancy I’ve seen ’em get out ’ere.”

Meantime Kit was sitting in the rather musty cab, trembling and shaking in every limb. It was the nearest approach to a bad accident that she had ever seen, and she made believe to herself that that was the reason of her trembling. She paid the cabman his fare, and ran into the house. She found Maitland awaiting her.

“Miss Constance has gone to bed, ma’am,” she said, as she took her mistress’s wrap. “Miss Violet is in the dining-room.”

“I hope Miss Constance is not ill?”

“No, ma’am; no worse; but she complained of her head, and Miss Violet and I persuaded her to go to bed. Dear me, ma’am, you look very white; has anything happened?”

“Oh, yes, Maitland, I saw an accident—I mean there was nearly an accident—a gentleman was leaning out of the carriage window, and he only drew in his head just in time to prevent its being knocked against a wall. It was dreadful, Maitland. Don’t say anything about it to Miss Violet.”

“Let me give you a tiny drop of brandy, ma’am,” said Maitland, promptly.

Kit was so extremely abstemious that Maitland proposed brandy as a sort of last resource. She was so thoroughly unnerved that she drank the modest restorative without a word of objection, and the tablespoonful of spirit, drowned as it was in water, seemed to go like fire through her veins.

“There, I am all right now,” she said, giving the glass back into Maitland’s hands. “These things do give one a turn.”

She passed on into the dining-room, where she found Violet Alison deep in the pages of a new novel. She looked up with a start as the door opened, and her sister-in-law entered the room.

“Oh, is that you, Kit?” she cried. “I was so deep

in this book, which isn't half bad, that I didn't hear you drive up. Did you drive?"

"Yes."

"Connie has gone to bed ; her head was so bad. I think she sat in the sun too much, or something. Well, was the theatre full?"

"Yes, very much as usual. It is very hot to-night, and I feel fagged."

"You look so," cried Violet Alison, turning and scanning her sister-in-law with sympathetic eyes. "You know you make a lot of money, Kit, and you've a big place in the world, but you do have to work for it ! I was only saying to Connie to-night that when we have a headache we can give ourselves up to thoroughly enjoying it ; but you, when you have a headache, you have to pretend that you haven't."

"I never have a headache, because," said Kit, "I never have time."

"But you look very fagged to-night."

"I am rather fagged ; the more reason why you should give me some supper."

"Poor little thing, she shall have supper !" cried Violet. "There is something very extra special here."

But Kit did not eat much of the very extra special dish that had been prepared for her return, and finally she went off to bed, saying that she was very tired. But it was not to sleep. Oh, no. She lay awake wondering, wondering what would be the end of it all. In that brief moment's flash, that instant of danger, she had realised with horror that Gifford Cox was more to her than one of her company. She felt as guilty that it should be so as if she had actually betrayed her husband—her husband who had loved and trusted her from first to last. It was a base reward to make to him for allowing her to go her own way, and to live her own life. How she regretted that she had ever stood in the way of Gifford Cox taking

the offer made to him by Mr. Snelson ! Her reason told her, in the next moment, that Gifford Cox had had no intention of accepting the offer of any one which would remove him out of the Grosvenor Theatre. She was determined that she would put a stop at once to any idea which he might be harbouring that she could ever be anything to him. She would hide always from him the fact that he was more to her than any man occupying the same position would be ; she would contrive that the girls should, one or both of them, go to town with her, and failing them, she would take Maitland. Never again would she come down alone with Gifford Cox. Then he would realise that there was, that there could be, nothing in it ; that whatever their professional sympathies, in personal sympathies they could never be anything to each other ; that they might act love, but they could never indulge in the real thing.

She received a letter from Gregory with her early cup of tea. It struck her with a sense of desolation. He told her what he was doing, expressed a good deal of satisfaction at the extraordinary hospitality of the Irish, and he asked no questions about her, beyond a general inquiry after the state of her health. He had never seemed so far away from her as he did on that memorable morning.

“I am going to dine at the Duke of Bandon’s to-night,” he said. “I hear that they have got the most beautiful girl in Ireland staying with them. I was over there calling with some of the fellows the other day, but we missed her : she had gone off to a garden party some miles away. It seems an awful shame, darling, that I should be enjoying myself here while you are grilling in a hot theatre in stuffy London. How I wish you would chuck it all and come over here ! Living is awfully cheap in Ireland—everybody says so—and you would have no

end of a good time. The people are so hospitable, so full of fun, and real gaiety and merriment ; always something going on without the elaboration and fuss that they make so much of in London. I quite dreaded coming to Ireland, as you well know, but it is the best place I have ever been in in my life. You would love it. Dinners, dances, garden parties, luncheons, and gaiety of all kinds. The invitations literally pour in upon us. How I wish you were here to take advantage of them !”

She sighed to think how little, after all these years, he knew her. True, they had only lived together from time to time, but still, he might have learned by this time that dinners and dances and garden parties and other festivities had little or no attraction for her. The tears were very near to her eyes as she replaced the letter in its envelope. She felt no inclination to get up. Before her there lay a hard fight, and she was painfully aware of it. Take which course she would, the way must be hard. By the needs of her profession she was, and still must be, in daily intercourse with this man—intercourse of the closest and most intimate nature. Night after night there must always be that scene on the terrace—that is to say, as long as the play was running—those few minutes when she must seem to take the deepest pleasure in his company, to give herself to him ; when, though she was only talking of Hironnelle’s Pastilles, she must appear to be revelling in his love. Protection there was none, and could be none, excepting her determination at all and every cost to be true to Gregory—to Gregory, who understood her so little that he could wish her to be with him in a life which he ought to know could be and would be no pleasure to her.

She contrived to keep the two girls very near to her all that day, but Gifford Cox did not invade the little villa fortress, nor did they meet until upon the terrace on the

Grosvenor stage. But if she had expected him to let the previous evening go by without comment, she was mistaken.

“You are not angry with me?” he said.

“No, I am not angry,” she answered; “I am very sorry. Because this idea of yours is very foolish, very absurd, and I—I—I——”

“Well?”

“Oh, well, you know without my saying it—you have disturbed a very pleasant friendship for nothing.”

“But must it be for nothing?”

“It must be. I am quite devoted to my husband, as you know; in any case, if it were not so, my reputation is—I—oh, why do you force me to talk so plainly?”

“But you care?”

“I care for your friendship—yes; I do not want—I will not have—your love. It is out of the question. It is a mere fancy, and you must get over it.”

“It is not fancy,” he said. And at this point he took her hands—by the exigencies of the play, you know—and held them against his breast. “It is not fancy, and you know it.”

“Indeed, you are wrong!” she cried, earnestly.

“I saw it in your eyes last night when you thought my skull was in danger,” he made reply, then drew her to her feet. “Dearest, you take too serious a view of life.” And then they passed along the terrace together, and the next moment she was alone in her dressing-room, wondering whether the speech in the play was true or not.

Still, it must not be forgotten that she was in a position to prevent any further protestations of affection from him. For days they did not meet except upon the stage, and if he looked reproaches, well, she made no response. To Alison she was wholly true, so far as everything outside her palpitating heart was concerned. She wrote to him almost daily, she entreated him to get a few days’ leave

and come to her. But with this he was unable to comply. Then she took another step. She complained a good deal during a few days of lassitude, want of energy, and the need of change ; and finally she arranged with Aubrey Brandon that she should have a fortnight's holiday, and leave her understudy to do the best that she could with the part. And when this was all settled she wrote to Gregory and told him what she had arranged, and asked him if he would like her to join him. He telegraphed back his joyful concurrence in this idea, and accordingly Kit went over to Ireland, fully determined to do everything which would be expected, not of Miss Mallinder, the actress, but of Gregory Alison's wife.

I may as well confess first as last that she was bored to extinction. The weather was extremely hot, and she was weary and worn with overwork and spent vitality. Her only instinct was to do nothing, to live a *dolce far niente* life of absolute rest and idleness, and the effort that she made to be a social success only served to make her exhaustion of nerve and mind the more extreme and apparent. And, as so often happens when one makes a special effort towards a certain end, Gregory Alison altogether misunderstood her. He saw that she was doing everything to make herself popular with the people whom he knew, and he fancied, by the extraordinary way in which most people can turn what they wish into what is best, that she was hankering after a life in which art had no part, in which, as I am afraid he put it, the theatre had no place.

She certainly was gay ; she certainly was made much of by everybody with whom she came in contact ; she could not complain of want of appreciation. But she was bored. Her own life of intensest excitement had spoiled her for the lesser excitement of mere society ; her great triumphs on the stage had spoiled her for the smaller

triumphs of private life. She was a little shy of the sound of her own voice, and once or twice, when her remarks happened to draw forth small explosions of laughter, she blushed scarlet and felt ready to sink into the ground. One lady asked her to recite, and did not seem at all to understand her when she said promptly that she could not utter a word except behind the footlights.

“You might,” said this lady, “give us a little scene out of ‘A Harvest of Roses.’ We have all seen it, but we should all like to see it done just for us, informally and without premeditation. It would be most attractive and fascinating to us, and we should never forget it, any of us.”

“I am sure you never would,” said Kit; “nor should I.”

“But you don’t mean to say that you can’t do it?”

“Not to save my life,” said Kit, earnestly. “I don’t remember a single word of ‘A Harvest of Roses.’ I suppose there is such a play, and they are playing it in London now, but I am on a holiday, dear lady, and ‘A Harvest of Roses’ in staying behind in London.”

“That means that you won’t?”

“No, no, but it is gone; and when I return to London, I shall have to look the part up. Indeed, believe me, it is true.”

“I was so glad,” said Gregory Alison, afterwards, “that you snubbed the old lady as you did. How dared she ask you to recite at her twopenny-halfpenny party?”

“Oh, she didn’t mean any harm. Did I snub her? That was unkind,” Kit cried.

“As if you want to carry the theatre with you wherever you go!” he went on, vexedly. “That’s the worst of people, always dragging shop forward on every occasion. It’s like hunting men who always want every run over fifty times, and others who can’t kill a cock pheasant once and have done with it.”

"Oh, well," said Kit, "she might have remembered that I'm a real lady for a little time, and want to forget the other side of the shield. But never mind, Greg, never mind ; perhaps one of these days——"

"Perhaps one of these days," he echoed, catching her up, "you will have had enough of the stage, and people will forget that you ever were anything but what you were born."

He was so vexed, and so serious in what he said, that she made no attempt to defend her beloved art.

"Don't worry, Greg," she said, simply ; "one can't expect everybody quite to understand."

So the days went by. He entreated her to remain with him longer, and after due consultation with Aubrey Brandon she consented to do so.

"So long as you are back by the end of September," Aubrey Brandon wrote, "that is all that is strictly necessary. I don't think it would do to risk your being away longer than that, because there are several other important events on, and your absence would be noticed. For instance, the Czar will be through town the last week in September, and it is not at all unlikely that he will wish to see 'A Harvest of Roses.'"

So Kit stayed and endured a while longer the life of weariness which she told herself was her duty. She did more than endure ; she dissembled with such skill that Gregory Alison never suspected the true state of her feelings. The only real pleasure she had was a three days' driving tour in which they indulged themselves. Gregory had already had his full allowance of leave, and this was a special concession to Miss Mallinder's charming presence. She felt during those three days almost as she had felt years before, when she and Gregory were all the world to each other. There were no tiresome calls, no dinner

parties, no questions, nothing to worry and irritate her. Gregory was driving a pair of superb horses in an extremely comfortable park phaeton, and that little tour did more to rejuvenate and invigorate Kit's jaded nerves than all the rest of her so-called holiday.

They got back to the hotel where they were staying very late on the third day. A pile of letters awaited them both. Kit began to open hers with a sense that her holiday time was past, that her enemy had found her. They were, however, wholly filled with pleasant news, and she turned from a letter written by Aubrey Brandon, and telling her that a box had been commanded for His Imperial Majesty for one of the evenings he would spend in London, as an exclamation of surprise and consternation fell from her husband's lips.

"Kit, my dear! Kit!" he cried. "Oh, my dear, such news! Listen to this. Here is a letter from Searchem to say that old Harkaway—my godfather, you know—died two days ago, and that he has left all his property to me! By Jove, it must be worth at least six thousand a year! I never expected a penny from him. Now, Kit, now, my dearest, you will be able to chuck the theatre for good and all!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE MASTER OF HARKAWAY

PERHAPS never was the news of accession to a fortune received with so little pleasure as stirred the heart of Kit Mallinder when she heard that Gregory's godfather had left him the whole of his property.

Gregory himself was all in a bustle, and took everything very much as a matter of course.

"I shall have to go off at once. Oh, there will be no

difficulty about leave—there is never any difficulty about leave in cases of real necessity. I must send a telegram to Searchem, and I think I ought to let the people at home know.”

“Oh, yes, you ought to let them know at home, certainly.”

“And you’ll go with me, of course. By-the-bye, have you any black clothes?”

“Oh, I can’t go with you,” said Kit. “I have a letter from Aubrey Brandon, and I must get back to London at once, dear.”

“Get back to London? Oh, to the theatre.”

“Yes, indeed, I must.”

“That’s a nuisance. However, perhaps it’s as well that you should not show; perhaps there won’t be any women at the funeral, as there are no near relatives. Then we’ll go across together, and I shall have to go on to London in any case; so I will go right back to London with you. We ought to get away at once. Can you start to-night?”

“Oh, yes, Maitland will soon pack me up,” she replied.

She said nothing more to him about leaving the stage. She felt that it was a natural first instinct with him. She was glad for his sake that he would have plenty of money and a charming place of his own; Gregory was not suited to be a poor man, not even to have to endure the comparative poverty in which he had been reared. They parted from the regiment with many expressions of goodwill, and on both sides a demeanour in which congratulation and solemnity were curiously blended.

“I wonder if I shall have to take the name?” said Gregory, some hours later, as they sped towards London.

“Oh, it is to be hoped not. It’s not half such a nice name as yours.”

“Oh, Harkaway is good enough. Anyway, it would

have to be Alison something—Harkaway·Alison, or Alison-Harkaway—in any case I sha'n't refuse the property because of that ! It is such a pretty place. Gad ! I never thought it would be mine ! It is astonishing to me that the old man could have kept his intentions so dark ; I always thought that Lucien Meredith was first favourite ; I suppose the truth is Lucien offended him."

They went straight home to the Belvedere, and after a meal, Gregory went to his lawyers, and an hour or two later straight down to Harkaway Castle, where his godfather was lying.

That night Miss Mallinder went down to the Grosvenor, not to take her usual part, but dressed in a little plain black gown to occupy the box which she called her own. It was arranged with a little open-worked screen, so that she could sit there and hide herself at any time from the public gaze. If she had had any doubts as to the advisability of giving up her career as an actress, they were all dispelled by that evening's performance. She watched it as only a woman accustomed to play the part could do. She saw how point after point was missed, how line after line fell flat and dead, how Gifford Cox's best efforts were all thrown away because of the lack of understanding and intelligence of the girl who was her understudy.

"Such a chance !" she fumed to Aubrey Brandon, who was in the box with her. "Why did you let me go on idling my time away while the piece was going to rack and ruin like this ? I trusted in you, Aubrey ; I never thought that you would keep me in the dark and let everything go to pieces like this."

"My dear Miss Mallinder," said Aubrey Brandon, "you had got to such a state of overstrain that you were simply not fit to go on longer without a holiday. Miss Croft does extremely well, considering that she is understudy to the—well, I won't say the first actress of the age, but one of the most distinguished actresses of the

day. It doesn't give Cox quite the same chance. I was talking to him about it yesterday ; but, as he said—very sensibly, I thought—it was much better that you should get a thorough holiday as you had broken away from the theatre. You will play to-morrow ?”

“Oh, yes, I shall play to-morrow, certainly. It is dreadful to see everything going to pieces like this. Besides, I should like to get my hand in before the Czar comes.”

So the following evening saw the reappearance of Miss Mallinder in her great part in “A Harvest of Roses.” She was so nervous about herself that they called a rehearsal for the morning. She did not stand in great need of it, and that evening the audience found the old fire and vitality, the same grace and charm as she had ever put forth for their delight.

“You are glad to be back ?” said Gifford Cox to her, when they came to the terrace scene.

“Oh, so glad ! It has been purgatory to be away, although I am all the better for my rest and for the change I have had.”

“I heard, by-the-bye, that Alison had come into a fortune.”

“Yes. He has gone down there now. It is a charming place, he says. It was really quite unexpected.”

“He is awfully set up about it ?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“And you ?”

“I ? Oh ! yes, I am glad for my husband's sake. It is always well for a man to be comfortably off, and not to have to think of money at every turn.”

“That is very horrid for everybody.”

She gave him no chance of saying anything but the most absolute commonplaces, and she went home to the Belvedere when all was over, feeling that the old state of affairs was at an end, that he had seen that the idea which

had taken possession of him during the summer on the river was a preposterous one—one that could not for a single moment be entertained by either of them.

And the next afternoon Gregory returned, very full of his new possessions—a little important, and with every arrangement for their future life cut and dried.

“Of course,” he said, “you will make arrangements for getting out of the theatre at once.”

“Oh, we cannot think about that just yet !”

“But what is the good of keeping on now? We have as much money as we shall ever need to spend. As you have practically broken the ice with the public, let Miss Croft go on and take your place permanently. You could not break the run of the piece, of course not ; but you can slip gracefully out of it yourself, and there is not the least occasion for you to appear again.”

“My dear Gregory !” she exclaimed. “Why, I played the part last night !”

“You played last night?”

“Why, of course I did.”

“You played your part in a ‘Harvest of Roses’ last night?” he repeated—“the night that my godfather—the same day that my godfather was laid in his grave? Why, it was not decent !”

“I did not play the part as your wife, but as Katherine Mallinder,” she said, quietly. “The public does not wait for private affairs. I never saw your godfather—I should not have known him if I had met him in the street—and there could be no reason why I should not do my usual work because he happened to be buried yesterday.”

“Your work !” he exclaimed.

“Yes, my work, Gregory. One does not work for one’s pleasure, excepting that one may find pleasure in one’s work. I do not consider that you are reasonable.”

“I suppose, then,” he said, with a sneer, “that if I

had died you would have continued your work just the same?"

"That is a different question altogether," she said, quietly; "I would rather not discuss it. If I had thought that my appearing last night would annoy you, I would, of course, have left Miss Croft go on playing the part, although, when the night before last I saw her doing so, I felt a traitor to myself and a traitor to my partner. I am sorry if it has annoyed you; I never thought of you one way or the other, not having known this poor old man who has left you his money. As to entirely giving up my work because you have come into a fortune, I should not dream of doing it. That would be to tell the world that I have only acted for money; it would be to make all the world believe that I am a thoroughly mercenary woman, which I am not."

"All the world will understand that I object to your playing in public any longer."

"It would be a great pity to so give yourself away, Gregory. If you had met me for the first time now, and you had married me on condition that I gave up my professional career—yes, well and good; everybody would understand it, and some people would honour you. But to allow your wife to do for money what you object to her doing when money is no longer an object, would be a confession—a confession that I am not willing you should make for me."

"And you persist," he said, coldly, "you persist in keeping on this—this—this work of yours?"

"Yes," she replied; "so long as the public wants me, so long as success waits for me, I shall not be willing to give up my chosen career."

"Look here, Kit," he said, "I don't think that you and I exactly understand one another. So long as it was a question of money, of showing the world what you could do, I was willing and glad enough that you should

try your luck and continue as an actress. Well, you have tried your luck ; you have succeeded to the very height of your ambition ; you have gone straight to the top of the tree ; you have set the world on fire, made a big name, run your own theatre ; you have been one of the stars of the world ! Well, have you not had enough of it ? Now there is no need. You can retire into private life with the advantages of a thoroughly comfortable income, of a charming place, of a good county position, and all the lustre that a great name can give you. Is not that enough for you ? Are you so greedy of admiration that you want to go on ? Haven't you had your fill of public applause, of glory ?”

She looked at him half doubtfully, half impatiently.

“You don't understand,” she said. “If you had ever been an actor yourself, you would realise how we actors feel about these things ; that it is not the money, nor the running one's own theatre, nor even what the public say, that keep us at it night after night, month after month, year after year ; it is the feeling of getting out of one's self—the feeling that we may go on for a week or a month at a time, and work like a galley slave, and then there comes a night when one is no longer Kit Mallinder or Mrs. Gregory Alison, a night when one never heard of the Mallinders, nor the Alisons, nor the White Horse, nor Harkaway Castle, nor anything else ; there comes a night when one has gone out of one's self into a new body—when one has gone out of this life into another—when one lives !—when one feels that the one night has been worth the week's grind, or the month's grind, or the year's grind that went before it ; there comes a night when one feels that every man, woman, and child in the house is here—in the hollow of one's hand—to do what one likes with, to sway to laughter or to tears as one chooses. It is that which I cannot give up !”

He looked at her half in contempt, half in wonder.

“I wish you had never seen or thought of the cursed theatre,” he said at last. “I ought to have stopped it at the beginning. And so I would have done if I had known how completely it would take you apart from me, as it has done. By Jove! who, to look at you now, would think that you were the little Kit—the little trusting, innocent girl whom I married? Look here, Kit; I am a rich man now; everything that I have or am is yours—on certain conditions. I am as much yours to-day as I was that day when we plighted our troth in the garden at Little Gracethorpe; but I am not content any longer to be just the husband of Miss Mallinder the actress. Some fellows might be proud of it—I am not. I am proud of being what I am; I am proud of being the master of Harkaway, but I want my wife to be my wife. I want my wife to be content with the position of my wife.”

“And I,” said Kit, “could never now be content with the position of your wife only. It is no use asking it. I went on the stage with your consent, not for a term, not as putting on the time, but because it was here—in me. I might have given up for you before I succeeded, because I had only the feeling that it was there—I had only the feeling that I might be able to do it; but now—now it is too late. I could not change my life or myself, or give up my place so long as I am able to keep on. You consented to my actions and gave me to the public, Gregory, and if you take me away, you will wrong the public, who have made me what I am.”

He drew a long breath.

“My dear child,” he said, suddenly dropping his offended tone, and speaking in his own everyday accents, “I never had such a high-flown idea in my life. You had no money, neither had I. You wanted to try what you could do, and I consented. You made a big success, and Heaven knows I have never stood in your light from that day to this. Why, the only time I ever

objected to anything that you did I gave way ; I laid aside my scruples and objections because—well, because you all convinced me that I was unreasonable. But as to giving you to the public, I never thought of such a thing ; as to adding to the glory of your career, that never entered into my mind either ! I never was moved by any but the most mercenary motives, and now that I have plenty of money, I only wish you to come and share my affluence with me, and, frankly, I cannot understand that you are not willing—ay, and eager to do so.”

She did not speak for a moment, then another idea came to her.

“ You are going to give up the Service ? ”

“ Give up the Service ! What an extraordinary idea ! ”

“ Oh, you are not going to give up the Service ? ”

“ I never thought of such a thing ! ”

“ But, dear boy, there is no longer any need——”

Gregory Alison burst out laughing.

“ Ah, there you smite me hip and thigh. Well, I suppose some fellows would feel that there was no need to go on, but I want to have a command. I will give up the Service when I have had my five years of command, and not before.”

She moved from where she was standing close up to him.

“ And does not that make you feel a little for me ? ” she asked.

He caught hold of her and kissed her with an outburst of passion not very frequent with him now.

“ If you put it like that,” he said, “ of course I will do anything you like, and consent to anything. I hate having you away from me—isn’t it natural that I should ? And if I say no more about your giving up your theatre and living your own life, you will remember that, if you have a duty to the public, Mrs. Gregory Alison has some duty to her husband.”

"I have never forgotten the obligations of Mrs. Gregory Alison," said she.

He bent and kissed her.

"So long as you remember them we must agree, not to differ—no, I won't call it to differ, but to go our own ways for a while longer. It is hard upon me not to have my wife with me, and perhaps it is hard upon you to have a husband who is not quite at one with you. I used to wish that I had chucked the Service, followed my heart, and tried to make an actor of myself; but as things are, they are best. I should never have been any good in that line, and I should never have had the patience to go on when the way was clear in the matter of money. And so it was all for the best that I kept to the sword and resisted the temptation of the mask."

So the breach was healed over yet once again. He left her palpitating in body and mind alike. What did he mean by the obligations of Mrs. Gregory Alison? she asked herself. Had he any suspicion of her feeling for Gifford Cox? No, no; her feelings had never been defined, even to herself; if I speak quite truly, they had gone no further than a vast qualm. He had spoken of the temptation that had assailed him to give up the sword for the mask. Well, it was a pity, yes, it was a thousand pities that he had not yielded; because if he had once been bitten with a love for the stage, whether success had attended his efforts or not, they would have been of one mind; they would have shared the same hopes, held the same opinions, pressed to the same ambitions and to the same goal; he might have been holding the place in "A Harvest of Roses" that Gifford Cox filled to-day.

And then something in her heart said, "No, never!" Something within her said trenchantly, forcibly, and incontrovertibly that Gifford Cox and Gregory Alison were two utterly different men, drawn from the same class, fired by the same early ambition, yet standing utterly

and irrevocably apart. Something in that hour of self-examination told her that there was a yet more subtle difference between them ; for had Gregory deserted the sword for the mask, had he followed where his heart had for the moment yearned to lead him, and had he succeeded to the very highest summit of his dreams, he would still never have succeeded in taking quite the same place that Gifford Cox had taken without trouble and without effort.

CHAPTER XXVI

MONA BERESFORD

WHEN Gregory Alison returned to his regiment, he found a budget of invitations awaiting him. Among others, with a few words of congratulation, was an invitation to dinner from the Duchess of Bandon. The dinner was for the evening following the day of his arrival, and Gregory sat down at once and wrote an acceptance of it.

“I hear,” wrote the Duchess, “that you have unexpectedly come into a fortune ; accept my sincere congratulations. Mr. Fingal told me yesterday that you would be back on the tenth ; do come over and join us at dinner on the eleventh. We have a house full of people, and shall be delighted to see you. I understand your wife is not with you ; so I will not go through the pretence of including her, as of course I would do if she were here. Yours truly,

“CECILIA BANDON.”

“What a pity it is,” said the Duchess to her husband, on receiving Gregory’s letter of acceptance, “what a pity it is that Captain Alison is married.”

“Why? You have no daughters to think of.”

“No, dear, I have no daughters to think of at present”—the Duchess had two little sons of three and four years old—“but with that nice property and such a good-looking fellow, he would have made a good match for Mona.”

The Duke laughed.

“Ah, well, little woman, it is too late for that now, and Mona is so pretty that you won’t find any difficulty in placing her successfully.”

If the truth be told, the Duchess was inclined to be extra cordial to Gregory Alison, not because he had come into a few thousands a year, but because she liked to have a smart and safe man about on her own account. The Duke was very much in love with her, but he was devoted to sport of all kinds, and had an invincible objection to degenerating into a mere squire of dames. Gregory Alison, on the contrary, was not an inveterate sportsman. He liked a day’s hunting, he liked a day’s shooting, he liked to be in the swim of everything that was fashionable and not over easy of attainment; but for its own sake he was not enthusiastic over any form of manly amusement. He meant to stay on in the Service until he had enjoyed his command, but he was not an enthusiastic soldier any more than he was an enthusiastic hunting man or an enthusiastic shot. It was some strange feminine instinct which told the young Duchess of Bandon that Captain Alison would be a safe and useful man to have on her list—a man who was good-looking, well-bred and well-off, young and in every sense presentable, a man who would always make even numbers at dinner, who would always help to fill up a house party, who would be useful in a thousand ways.

But for once the young Duchess, who was an extremely astute young woman, who had established herself very well in the world with a quite extraordinary cleverness, had reckoned without her host. For Gregory Alison did

exactly the opposite to what she had intended him to do ; that is to say, he at once attached himself to her beautiful young cousin, Mona Beresford, as if no such person existed in the world as Miss Katherine Mallinder, otherwise Mrs. Gregory Alison. And, if the truth be told, he did it so cleverly that not even Miss Beresford herself was at first aware of his admiration for her.

She was very beautiful—beautiful in the real Irish style of abundant dark tresses, brilliant grey-blue eyes put in with a dirty finger, and was, moreover, possessed of a lovely figure and all that is sparkling and vivacious in the Irish character.

“What a pity he is married, Mona,” said the Duchess that first evening, when Gregory Alison had bidden them adieu.

“Oh, I don’t know ; he seems happy enough,” said Mona Beresford, carelessly.

“Did he speak to you of her?” the Duchess went on.

“Oh, yes ; he seems quite devoted.”

As a matter of fact, Gregory Alison had never mentioned his wife ; and Mona Beresford, who had been away during most of the time that Kit had stayed with the regiment, now learned for the first time that such a person as Mrs. Gregory Alison existed.

“Why didn’t she come?” she asked, rather abruptly.

“Come? She doesn’t live with him !”

“Oh, really !”

“She was here with him—she has been here—she was staying here a little while ago, when you were away ; but she is an actress.”

“Oh !”

“A very proper, swagger kind of actress,” said the Duchess. “She is Miss Mallinder. I can’t think why she doesn’t give up the stage now that he is so well off. I suppose she is fond of it ; or not fond of him, or something.”

“Is she pretty?” Mona inquired.

“Yes, more than pretty ; there is something more out of the common ; something very distinguished about her appearance. She might be a queen by her looks.”

“A stage queen,” cried Mona, with her rollicking Irish laugh. “At all events, with him or not with him, Cecilia, he seems very well satisfied with his lot. Perhaps she is not going to remain long on the stage.” And then she turned away, singing, as if the subject no longer interested her.

But Mona thought a good deal more about Gregory Alison than she would have liked any one to know. He attracted her, and never having seen his wife, it seemed to her as if there was no such thing as a wife in the background. He spent a great deal of his time at Bandon Towers, paying much deferential court to the young Duchess, and seeming to fill the exact position for which she had destined him. The regiment was very gay at this time ; there were many dances, formal and informal, many entertainments of different kinds, and at each and all he met the Duchess and the beautiful Mona Beresford. The Duchess was not dancing that autumn, but Captain Alison frequently took her in to supper, and acted as her squire in other ways. And for reward he had always several dances on the programme of the beautiful Mona. And let it be clearly understood that they were friends, and nothing more. Not one word passed between them to which the most rigid and puritanical of chaperons could have objected. They talked on the most serious subjects ; they discussed earnest problems ; they were the closest of friends—as two men might have been. He told her that he liked talking to her because she was so sensible, and she told him that she preferred talking to him because he never said stupid things—like other men.

And through that winter they contrived to see a good deal of each other, and Gregory Alison quite forgot to

urge Kit to give up the stage and to settle down in her proper place as his wife. He seemed to get out of the way of writing to her as often as he had been used to do ; he frequently now apologised for the length of time which slipped by between his letters, and for their baldness and paucity of news when he did write them. And when he had a few days' leave, he spent it at Bandon Towers.

"I have only got seven days' leave," he wrote to her, "and shall not have my long leave until about the middle of January. It does not seem worth while going to London in this weather for such a short time, especially as you cannot go anywhere with me in the evenings ; so I am going to improve the shining hour at Bandon Towers instead. But of course, darling, when I come to town for my long leave, it will be all different. Then perhaps you will be able to make more use of your understudy, and you may even get a few days' holiday so that we could go off to Paris or somewhere together."

But to this Kit did not commit herself. She told him that she thought it was a long way in such weather for only a few days' leave, and hoped that he would have a lovely time at Bandon Towers, and she asked a few questions about the Duchess, whom she had seen, and with whom she had dined during her last stay with Gregory.

And so the orb of Kit began to wane, and the star of Mona Beresford to rise into the ascendant.

It was about this time that Constance Alison became engaged to be married, with the prospect of consummation at a very early date. The man was a county magnate in the neighbourhood of Little Gracethorpe, and the whole Alison family were very pleased at the new turn of events. Naturally, this prevented Constance from visiting her sister-in-law, excepting for a few days when she required to be in London for purposes of shopping, and equally she did not wish her sister Violet to be

parted from her during the few weeks that were left to them of their hitherto unbroken life together.

So, at this time, Kit was living a very lonely, indeed, I may say, an isolated life. I have explained before that it was instinct with her to keep the majority of her acquaintances from going any nearer to her heart and life. On the rare occasions when she showed herself in public, it was part of her burden of popularity to receive the homage and attention of hundreds of men and women who must be, as a matter of course, wholly indifferent to her. To her private life she had from the very first admitted but very few persons, and of those extremely few were men. Aubrey Brandon came and went on matters of business or policy only ; the Duchess of Aberdeen was her most intimate friend, and naturally the intimacy was not one of anything approaching to daily intercourse, for the Duchess was a woman beyond a leader of society, a woman of great and philanthropic ideas, of enormous influence, of numberless and pressing engagements. It was one of her sweetest relaxations when she could spare an hour to lunch with Kit Mallinder, or to go and sit by her cosey fire and talk of subjects quite outside her own daily life, over a cup of fragrant tea. Many other women there were who could gladly have found themselves in the position of Miss Mallinder's most intimate woman friend, but Kit was very difficult to become intimate with, and the Duchess of Aberdeen remained the only one who could with truth claim that position.

When first Kit had returned to her work after her visit to Ireland, she had felt a certain shrinking from a formal renewal of intercourse with Gifford Cox. Gifford Cox had, however, with infinite tact, put a bold face upon the situation from the very beginning. He had steadily ignored that scene in the train down to Kingston—that scene, you know, when he had been foolish enough to tell her that he cared for her, and to challenge her to say

that she did not care for him ; he had accepted her tacit refusal of his advances in the most absolute way, and by dint of always speaking to her with the utmost formality, by dint of carefully blotting out any expression of feeling from tone or face, he had quietly slipped into the place of her most intimate friend and most valued adviser.

And Kit was wholly unsuspecting. Yet I must tell the truth, and admit that to Kit this friendly intercourse was wholly sweet. It was such a relief to her at first to find that he had entirely ceased any attempt at love-making, and she congratulated herself that she had taken such a sensible, strong-minded, and high-handed course from the very beginning. She ought to have known that a man who had once told his love would not be content to go on the level road of friendship, and have no further thought of the heights and valleys of passionate love. She might have known, had she been older and wiser, had she been more versed in the ways of the world, and less wrapped up in her beloved art—she might have known that there is nothing so impossible as friendship between lovers, that friendship is a possibility between all sorts and conditions of men and women excepting those who have once dreamed of a closer and dearer tie.

I can hardly tell you what was in Gifford Cox's mind at this period. He loved her with all the strength and ardour of a young and fervid nature, of an artistic and strongly poetic temperament. I can hardly say that he had faith in the future or any hope thereof, but he had ever the feeling that if he kept long enough her friend, he might in time become her lover. He was strangely patient, doggedly determined, full of resolution to lose nothing for want of patience and waiting. So he had gradually retrieved the mistake he had made earlier in the year, and had slipped quietly into the position of intimate friendship.

And Kit was more than content that it should be so.

At first she had just mentioned him in her letters to Gregory. "Gifford Cox came to tea with me yesterday," she said, in one of them, and Gregory in reply said, "I am glad you are seeing something of Cox. He is one of the few men that I don't mind your being on terms with. I am just off to dine and sleep at Bandon Towers—a house full of people. I wish you could see Mona Beresford; she is certainly extremely good-looking." Then after a time, he would tell her that he was off to Bandon Towers, but without mentioning Mona Beresford; and Kit, on her side, would forget to tell him that Gifford Cox had been to lunch with her, or that she had been on some little jaunt with Gifford Cox. And so these two, who should have been all the world to each other, drifted on their separate ways apart.

It was just at the end of January that Aubrey Brandon and Kit put on a new piece.

"Of course," wrote Kit to her husband, "you will be able to get over for the first night. It seems as if we actors can never tell what a piece is going to be until it has actually been before the public, but, so far as I can tell, this is quite the most wonderful play of modern times. It is not exactly a religious play, but it is next door to a religious play. It involves deep questions of faith, great human interests, and has the strongest love story that you can imagine. There is great excitement over it in the theatrical world, and the demand for seats is beyond anything that we have experienced before."

In reply to this he wrote back that he was more than sorry that he would not be able to get over for the production. "I shall come later on," he said, "and will see it then. You know I am not very fond of *premières*, so do not worry about my non-appearance, but give my seat to some more worthy occupant."

This letter, charmingly, brightly, apparently lovingly, written as it was, struck Kit with a sense of chill and of misunderstanding. He had had very little leave of late, she thought. How strange that he could not get leave for such an important event as a first night at the Grosvenor! Then she opened her drawer and took out a letter of his written some weeks previously. She kept all his letters, kept them as a sort of religion. Yes, surely she had not been wrong. "I am sorry, darling," she found in one of them, "not to spend my few days' leave with you, but it scarcely seems worth while to go over for so short a time. I get my long leave in the middle of January——" I get my long leave in the middle of January! Then he was actually on leave at the time—on leave, and spending it with the regiment! That was very strange. She turned and looked at the envelope in which the letter had reached her. The post-mark was not that of the town in which he was quartered, but a name which she did not know. Bally—she made out—Bally-winch—Ballywinch—was that it? She eagerly turned over his other letters. Ah! Here was one written from Bandon Towers; Ballywinch was the post-mark—it was more distinct. So, he was actually staying at Bandon Towers, and had begun his leave and gone on a visit without so much as apprising her of the fact! She set her teeth hard. It was not that she cared what Gregory did—that state of mind had gone by for ever; no, no, it was not that she cared for his love—he had killed that long ago by his indifference; but she did care for her just rights, and, being his wife, it was her right that she should know at least the main lines on which he chose to sketch his life.

Gregory, meantime, was comfortably established at Bandon Towers, if the truth be told, unable to tear himself away from the love which had taken complete possession of him, ay, of his very body and soul. The

Duchess thought that he was hers—that he was her “best man,” as she put it ; and, truly, he was always ready to do her behests, to be at her beck and call, to squire her here, attend upon her there, to be, in short, an excellent substitute for His Grace of Bandon when that noble sportsman had other matters with which to occupy himself. And the Duchess’s world looked on and smiled indulgently, regarding Gregory as a lucky man to be the husband of Miss Mallinder, the great actress, and the favourite swain of Her Grace the Duchess of Bandon, to be a young man of extreme good looks, master of a charming place, possessed of a handsome income, to be a general favourite wherever he went.

“I don’t think that I will dance with you again to-night, Captain Alison,” said Mona Beresford one evening, when a big dinner at the Towers had evolved into an informal dance.

“Not dance with me again ! And why ? What have I done ?” he exclaimed.

“Oh, it’s not what you have done, but I don’t think that I had better. I saw Cecilia looking at us just now.”

“Well, and if she did ?”

“Well !” And Mona Beresford laughed. “I think we shall be wise if we do not dance any more.”

“What nonsense ! You are engaged to me for two dances more, and I mean to have them ?”

“No, I think we had much better not.”

“But why ?”

“Because, I tell you, Cecilia, has her eye upon us.”

“The Duchess is nothing to me,” said Gregory, rather haughtily.

“No, perhaps not ; but she is to me. She is my cousin, and I live here. She has always been very good to me since she married the Duke, but if I get interfering with her men I don’t think she would be quite as nice.”

“I am not one of the Duchess’s men,” said he, flushing indignantly. “She is my hostess—nothing more.”

“Oh, you think so! Well, I know her better than you do, and I don’t think that Cecilia looked pleased when she saw us dancing together just now. I would rather not dance with you again.”

“Surely you are not afraid of the Duchess?”

“Afraid! No, not in that sense. But I am a poor relation, you know; and poor relations get to watch which way the wind blows and the stream runs.”

For a moment he looked at her incredulously.

“My God!” he said, at last. “Has it come to that? That you are afraid to dance with me—that you are afraid to come and sit out with me—that the Duchess thinks I belong to her! My God! Look here, I never intended to say this to you; I intended to go away; to go—to go—to go home to my—wife—to do the dutiful husband—to try and forget you. I had no business to come here to spend part of my long leave. I tried to go; I tried to steel myself against you; I have tried to set my heart and my eyes and my teeth upon my tongue! But it is of no use. Mona, Mona, you and I were made for each other. What does the world matter against love? Come with me! I promise you that the devotion of my life shall reward you for anything that you may lose, but don’t, don’t stay in this bondage of poverty any longer!”

CHAPTER XXVII

DESERTED !

WHAT happened next fell like a thunderbolt upon at least half a dozen sections of society. The first was, of course, that gathered just then at Bandon Towers.

“DEAR CECILIA,”—Mona Beresford wrote in her parting letter,—“try not to be angry with me. Gregory Alison and I are going away together. You have always been so good to me, Cecilia, that I hate to leave you like this. I daresay you will blame me, but if you knew the state that my heart is in, you would only pity your unfortunate cousin,

“MONA.”

The Duke was gone a-hunting, having started very early in the morning, when this letter was brought to the Duchess's bedside.

She broke into a passion of angry weeping as she realised what had happened. It was not that she cared two straws about Gregory Alison; her first instinct in knowing him had been that had he been free he would have made a charming match for her cousin Mona. But she was always conscious that she herself had married extremely well (for the daughter of a none too well-off Archdeacon had, in marrying the Duke of Bandon, succeeded in making one of the most important matches of the year), and she had always a sort of feeling that her husband's world would ever be on the look-out for the joints in her armour, and her first instinct was that this escapade of Mona's would let her down in the eyes of society at large. Then she let her mind slip back in retrospect over the unhappy marriages which she had

known since she had been the Duchess of Bandon. There was Lady Margaret Chatterton—she had run away from two husbands since Cecilia Beresford had become Duchess of Bandon ; then there was Victoria Power—she had run away with one of the grooms at Power's Hope ; and there was Mrs. Adair, who went everywhere and was cousin to the Duke himself—her infamies were as well known as—well, as Cleopatra's. So the Duchess rose and comforted herself, and proceeded to impart the news gradually among the house party.

Her first confidante was the old Duchess—that is to say, the old, old Duchess—the Duke's grandmother, who just then was staying with them.

“Run away with Captain Alison, has she? Humph! I thought something of that kind was going to happen.”

“Oh, grannie!” cried Duchess Cecilia. “Why didn't you tell me?”

“Tell you? No, no, my dear. They do say that there is no fool like an old fool ; but I have always believed in minding my own business. I once interfered in a love affair and got abused for my pains ; I said then, and I have stuck to it since, that never would I interfere with anybody's love affairs again. The young man is rich and well-looking, and Mona hasn't a penny ; she has completely compromised herself with him, and quite the best thing that she could do was to run away with him. I suppose that that demure little wife of his will divorce him, and we must make Theo follow them up and insist upon proper settlements. I shouldn't worry about it if I were you.”

“I am sure Theo will be awfully angry!”

“Oh, well, I daresay he will, but his being angry won't alter matters.”

“He will say it was my fault!” said the Duchess.

“Oh, hard words break no bones,” returned grannie, with an indulgent air.

Grannie, for all her carelessness and her apparent indifference to the magnitude of the scandal, occupied herself during the rest of the day by discussing it with the other ladies staying in the house.

"A very good thing," she remarked to one of her special confidantes, "that the little hussy has gone off with young Captain Alison. I wonder that Cecilia was good-natured enough to have her in the house ; with her pretty face and her kittenish, bright ways. She'd have ousted Cecilia if it hadn't been for this Alison ; I think he has done her an uncommonly good turn."

"You haven't much opinion of your grandson," said her confidante, chuckling over the old lady's worldliness.

"Opinion of my grandson ? Indeed and I have ; just as much as I have of any other man, which is that they're all as weak as water, with hearts ready to fall like ninepins before the first pair of bright eyes that blink at them. I have seen that precious young miss shoot her glances at 'dear old Theo,' as she called him. I think she's very well out of Cecilia's road."

The Duke's remarks were strangely characteristic.

"What had you been doing to make her dissatisfied with her home?" he demanded angrily of the Duchess.

"Doing ? Why, Theo, I was most good to her—most good ; I did everything for her just as if she had been my sister ; and I think she has behaved most ungratefully in disgracing me like this."

"It is rather a let-down," said he ; "and I am afraid people will make you feel it later on. Of course, he won't be able to marry her with that wife of his in the background."

"I should think his wife will only too gladly divorce him and get rid of him !" cried the Duchess, angrily.

"I am sure I only hope, poor thing, she won't blame me. I thought she was quite charming—too charming a great deal for him."

“Ah, you’ve changed your tune since he saw the perfection of Mona’s charms,” cried the Duke, with a blustering laugh.

Truth to tell, he was disgusted with the new state of affairs. He felt that it was hard upon his wife, and yet his first instinct had been to blame her as being the primary cause of the scandal.

Meantime a letter from Gregory had gone speeding on its way to the Belvedere.

“I don’t know what you will think of me or say to me,” it began, without any pretence at prefix. “I am writing to tell you that after this we can never be anything to each other again. I have loved you very deeply, but I think we made a mistake in trying to go against the usual custom which makes husbands and wives live together, sharing one life and holding only the same interests. I am just starting on my long leave. I am going abroad. I do not know whether I shall return to the regiment or not. But I am not going alone; Miss Beresford has agreed to cast in her lot with me, and I will leave you free to live your own life as you choose. If you wish to see Searchems, they have full power to act for me. Try in the future, dear Kit, to think kindly of me. I shall always be your friend,

“GREGORY ALISON.”

Kit received this letter by the mid-day post. Some extraordinary instinct told her, as she broke the envelope, that it contained news of no common kind. She read it with widely dilated eyes, with a strange sensation knocking at her heart, with oddly mingled feelings—feelings in which relief, shock, distress, pain, and a new sensation of liberty were all curiously intermingled.

So Gregory himself had, with unflinching hand, cut the cords which bound them. After a time she would be free; practically, so far as any tie of honour went, she

was free now ! She wondered, in a vague, dull kind of way, what this Mona Beresford was like. She wished that Gregory had thought of sending her photograph. And then, as the grotesqueness of the idea stood fully revealed to her, her eyes suddenly filled with tears, and she hid her face upon her hands and wept bitterly. She was not grief-stricken, no ; it was a shock—a wrench—a tearing asunder of cords which had been of late irksome and uncomfortable ; but her chiefest sensation was one of relief—yes, distinctly of relief. No thought of Gifford Cox entered her mind ; and yet it was as if he stood waiting at the door of her heart, not venturing in, and yet a presence which was there. She never actually thought of him ; her whole mind and heart were occupied with the actual event of the moment.

She had not yet dried her eyes when Maitland came into the room with a telegram.

“Don’t you feel well, madam ? Has anything happened ? Is anything the matter ?”

“Oh, yes, Maitland ; something dreadful is the matter ?”

“With the master ?” asked Maitland.

“Yes. You will know all in time. I—I—I—can’t speak of it yet.”

“I hope the master is not ill, madam ?” said Maitland.

“Ill ? In the best of health and spirits, Maitland. But he and I have done with each other !”

“Dear, dear, dear !” exclaimed Maitland, who was not in the least surprised. “Perhaps the telegram is to say that he has changed his mind, madam.”

Thus reminded of the missive on Maitland’s little tray, Kit took the telegram and opened it. It was from Little Gracethorpe. “Coming up immediately. Arrive four o’clock,” it said ; and was simply signed “Alison.”

So they already knew ! She would have to go over it all with them. Well, the sooner the better. She wondered who was coming ; whether it would be the Arch-

deacon, with his wise, old, childlike worldliness ; Mrs. Alison, severe and perhaps full of blame to her ; the girls, tearful—— Oh, it was a dreadful business ! But there was no use in flinching ; she would have to go through with it as best she might. She bade Maitland see that a bedroom was prepared in case any of the Alison family wished to stay the night, and she gave notice at the office that there would probably be extra people to dinner with her. And at a quarter-past four the door opened to admit them. It was Mrs. Alison who bustled in, large and stately, wearing voluminous and dignified garments of velvet and fur, which made her a presence. Kit caught a glimpse of the Archdeacon's pink, distressed face behind her, but Mrs. Alison gave her no chance of speaking to him.

“ My poor child ! ” she exclaimed, and two great wings of velvet edged with fur spread themselves out, and the next moment Kit was enfolded in an embrace which, if maternal, was perilously nigh to suffocation. “ My poor child ! We have come to you, the daddy and I, without the delay of a moment ! What are we to say to you ? ”

“ Nothing,” said Kit, from the depths.

“ Such a wife as you have been to him ; such a brave, good, devoted little soul ; such an honour to us ; and for such a horrible thing to happen, when everything was smiling and prosperous, and you have plenty of money to do just what you like with. Oh, my poor child ! We shall never get over it, the Archdeacon and I—never ! ” Then she released Kit, and Kit was able to turn her attention to her father-in-law.

“ God bless you, my dear,” he said, very solemnly. “ I blush to come upon this errand. I have been a kind and indulgent father to my children, as you will bear me out ; and little did I ever think, my dear Kit, that I should one day come to you and ask your forgiveness for having married you to my son.”

“Don’t say that, daddy,” said Kit. “We were very happy while it lasted. Perhaps it was my fault ; perhaps I ought to have given up my work when Gregory came into Harkaway, and there was no longer any need to think of money. He wanted me to do so. If I had been with him I don’t think it would have happened.”

“True to the last !” said the Archdeacon, speaking to his wife.

Kit positively shivered.

“My poor heartbroken darling !” said Mrs. Alison.

“Please don’t,” said Kit ; “oh, please don’t ! Try to be to me as if nothing had happened. Don’t turn your back upon me altogether, but—but—don’t say a word against Gregory ; I can’t stand it ! Don’t make too much of me, and pet me up ; it only makes me feel worse. Dear Mrs. Alison, I have been wrapped up in my own business ; I have made everything second to my profession—a wife cannot do it and hold the same place as the wife who is a wife only. I have drifted away from Greg, and Greg has drifted away from me ; and it is all my fault—my fault !”

“There was no reason why Gregory could not have given up his wretched regiment, particularly when he came into Harkaway Castle. I told him so when he told me that he had asked you to give up the stage. I said—I said, ‘It is preposterous to expect Kit to give up when she is at the very top of the tree. Let her have five or ten years more, and then she will be willing and glad to retire into private life.’ ”

“You did ?” cried Kit.

“Indeed I did. I think it would have been iniquitous to expect you to give up such a great career, such a great sphere of usefulness, as the Archdeacon always said. No, my dear Kit, you know quite well that I was dead against your going on the stage when you first suggested it ; I was dead against it, and perhaps I was not quite as kind

to you as I ought to have been—no, looking back, I don't think that I was. But what I said I said for your good, and when it was shown to me that it was for your good, and for Gregory's good as well as for yours, and when you showed me how good and distinguished and virtuous an actress could be, then I withdrew my objections absolutely ; and a loyal friend I have been to you from that day to this, and intend to be as long as I am alive."

"You are too good," said Kit ; "oh, you are too good ! There is only one thing I have to ask of you—don't make any difference to Gregory. I entreat you, don't let there be any difference to Gregory !"

"Difference !" said Mrs. Alison, angrily ; "and, indeed, there must and will be a difference. Gregory will always be our son—nothing can alter that—but sons who run their course straight are not, and ought not, and never can be, upon the same footing with their parents as the sons who have run their course crookedly. We had no idea, the Archdeacon and I, that you and Gregory had ever been at variance."

"We never have been," Kit cried.

"What ! Was this wholly unexpected?"

"Wholly. I was expecting him every day to spend his long leave here with me. We had been intending—that is to say he had proposed—to go to Paris and have a little trip together if I could arrange for my work to be taken, as, of course, I could have done, and would willingly and cheerfully have done."

"And you knew nothing of what was going on?"

"Not one word," said Kit ; "not one single word. As to a quarrel—why, dear Mrs. Alison, believe me, Gregory and I never had a quarrel in our lives ! We have held different opinions—as, for instance, he never liked my playing the part of Prudence Pasturell, and we did not agree upon that point—but we never quarrelled ! I would not, could not, have quarrelled with Gregory !

But that is gone by now. What is done cannot be undone, and nothing can give me back the place that I once had—nothing ! All I ask is that you make no difference, or as little difference as you can, with Gregory on account of this—of this new tie of his. She is very young, and I believe she is very beautiful. I never saw her. I dined with the Duchess——”

“The Duchess !” cried Mrs. Alison, disapprovingly. “What Duchess ?”

“The Duchess of Bandon—with whom she lived. She is her cousin. Didn’t he tell you ?”

“He told us nothing ; he told us nothing except that he had left you and formed a new tie with a girl called Mona Beresford. It is all that I know—I may say it is all that I wish to know.”

“Oh, no, don’t say that ! Some day you will receive her ; at all events, don’t let me stand in the way of your doing so ; it will only make me more wretched.”

“I will never receive this person in my house !” cried Mrs. Alison, indignantly.

“Perhaps some day you won’t feel like that. I don’t know how to put it ; I would like to keep your friendship, but I would like you to make no difference to him. It will be hard enough on them by and by—hard enough.”

At this point the Archdeacon got up and walked to the window.

“He is feeling it dreadfully,” said Mrs. Alison, in an aside to Kit, “dreadfully. I have never seen him so broken. Well, Kit, my poor child, my more than daughter, we can never, the Archdeacon and I, thank you sufficiently for the kindness and consideration which you have shown to us in our hour of trouble. May it come back to you a thousand-fold. We felt almost as if you would not be willing to receive us. I have left the two girls at home heartbroken ; they both wanted to

come ; they both begged and prayed to come ; but we told them that it would be better if we came to you first. They naturally do not wish their lifelong friendship with you to be broken, and they both entreated me to say so. And Constance, with her love, begged me to tell you that if you could possibly bring yourself to attend her marriage, as you had originally promised to do, she hopes that you will not allow this new state of affairs to stand in the way thereof."

"But Gregory !" cried Kit, pitifully.

"Gregory will not be present at his sister's wedding," said Mrs. Alison, with a severe dignity which made Kit feel that this side of the affair was out of her hands ; "and we would wish—Constance would wish, and Constance's *fiancé* would wish—to show to the whole world while the affair is yet young that our sympathies go with you, our son's and brother's wronged and deserted wife !"

CHAPTER XXVIII

ILL NEWS TRAVELS APACE

It had never been the custom of the Archdeacon and Mrs. Alison to stay with Kit when they found themselves in London. They frequently came up for what the Archdeacon called the inside of a week, when they always dined with her and paid her several morning or afternoon visits, but they invariably put up at the same quarters in a small hotel in Jermyn Street. On this occasion, however, when Maitland had brought in some tea, and Mrs. Alison had laid aside her voluminous garment, Kit asked where they meant to stay, and as she had ordered a bedroom to be got ready, whether they would care to use it ?

"I have told them at the bureau that probably I shall

have guests for dinner this evening," she said, "and the room is there if you wish it. You see, I did not know whether you or the Archdeacon or the girls would come; or—or—indeed, whether it might be any one else."

Mrs. Alison's proud face quivered at the possibility suggested in this speech.

"My dear, we have, as you know, always gone to the same place in Jermyn Street, but if you have really a bedroom for us we thought that it would be better for you—didn't you, Freddy, dear—if we were to stay here for a day or two. It would show the whole world that we are for you and with you. What do you think?"

"Dear Mrs. Alison," said Kit, "I don't know what I think; I only know that I can never thank you sufficiently for all that you and the Archdeacon are and have been to me. The room is ready, and I shall be more than glad if you will occupy it. You won't mind dining at six o'clock with me, will you?"

"My dear, we mind nothing," said Mrs. Alison; "nothing at all. We came straight here, so that our modest luggage is actually downstairs in the office; we felt that we could not lose one moment in getting to you. Any time that suits you for dinner will suit us; and, painful as it is to think of pleasure just now, we would like to go to the Grosvenor to-night to show ourselves, so that people may know from the very first what our feeling is towards you."

Kit glanced at the clock. There was just time to telephone to the theatre before the box office closed.

"Excuse me, I will telephone now," she said; and going across the room rang the telephone bell.

In a few minutes the message was sent and answered, and then Kit rang her own bell for Maitland.

"Maitland," she said, "the Archdeacon and Mrs. Alison are going to stay here to-night. The room is ready, is it not?"

"Yes, madam ; all ready."

"Very good. And tell them in the bureau that there will be two extra for dinner."

"Six o'clock, as usual, madam?" asked Maitland.

"Oh, yes, six o'clock."

There was a third very tiny sitting-room in Kit's charming flat, and this communicated with the large room which had been prepared for the visitors.

"Dear Archdeacon," she said, "you have only to turn this handle to make this room as warm as you wish, and you can smoke here, or do just what you like. I think, if I may suggest, Mrs. Alison, you ought to lie down for an hour : because you have been dreadfully upset to-day, and a little rest must be good for you."

"I would like to write a letter, Kit, dear," Mrs. Alison answered ; "because the girls are waiting so anxiously to know how you are. I may send them your love?"

"My dearest love," said Kit, her lips quivering again. "But do rest, dear Mrs. Alison. You will find everything for your letter, but you should rest."

"I will, my dear ; I will, indeed."

As the door closed behind Kit, the lady turned to the Archdeacon.

"Freddy," she said, "there will be a heavy day of reckoning for our misguided and unfortunate son. To think that I was ever set against such a marriage !"

"And yet, my dear, it has not turned out well," he said, with his wonderful air of child wisdom.

Thus released, Kit went back to her chair by the fire-side. Although, in a certain sense, the presence of her father- and mother-in-law was painful to her, she knew that their intention towards her was good, and that their worldly wisdom was worth its weight in gold. Nothing would stand her in such good stead as the fact that immediately upon the receipt of the news of their son's elopement with another woman, his father and mother

had betaken themselves instantly to his wife, and had remained with her through the first bitterness of the separation. And it was better, mind you. She was not the heartbroken, deserted wife that the Alison family pictured. The two had drifted away from each other so completely that it was little more to her than a wrench when she found that he had given her up entirely for another woman. They had not lived together sufficiently long at a time for matrimony to have become a habit with them, as it so often does with those with whom the fires of love have burnt out as completely as the fire is burnt out in any extinct volcano.

They dined quietly together, and by tacit consent did not any of them allude to the tragedy which had just loomed upon the family horizon. Kit went off to the theatre at her accustomed time, and sent back the little brougham that she used that her guests might go later,—that is to say, in time for the performance. Everybody saw them ; everybody who knew anything of Miss Mallinder's domestic concerns—of her private life—knew that her husband's father and mother were up in the big box usually kept for Royalty and distinguished persons.

“I say, Brandon,” said Gifford Cox, as he came into the wing ready to go on when he had his cue, “do you see that the Alisons—the Archdeacon and his wife—are up there?”

“Yes, I knew they were coming ; I knew this afternoon. Miss Mallinder telephoned to know if there was a good box empty.”

“Then it isn't true?”

“What isn't true?”

“Oh, haven't you heard?”

“No, I've heard nothing.”

“I had better not say—perhaps it isn't true,” said Gifford Cox, shutting his mouth tight and wishing heartily

that he had not let slip even those few words. Then he received his cue and passed on to the stage.

Aubrey Brandon stood there idly watching the play, and conscious that a clerical figure and clean-shaven, pink, clerical face occupied the middle seat in the big box opposite.

“What the devil did he mean?” his thoughts ran. “‘Then it isn’t true.’ Now, what could the fellow mean by that?”

He was so curious that when Gifford Cox came off and disappeared in the direction of his dressing-room he followed him, knocking at the door and walking in in his usual friendly style.

“I say, Cox,” he said.

“Sir!” said Gifford Cox, looking round from the dressing-table with his hare’s foot in his hand.

“I say, Cox.”

“Sir!” said Cox, smiling.

“Yes, I know; but, Cox, what did you mean just now?”

“About what?”

“Well, about something not being true when you found that the Archdeacon and his wife were in front?”

Gifford Cox applied himself leisurely to the improvement of his countenance.

“Look here, old fellow,” he said at last, “I let that slip. I wish I hadn’t said anything.”

“But what did you mean?”

“How curious you are! Well, if you must know, I met a fellow in St. James’s Street to-day who had just arrived from Ireland. He told me that there was the devil’s own row to pay at Bandon Towers—the Duke of Bandon’s place—because Gregory Alison had run away with the Duchess’s cousin, a very beautiful girl—considered one of the most beautiful girls in Ireland.” Aubrey Brandon gave vent to a long, low whistle. “But

as his father and mother are here, it is hardly likely to be true."

"My dear fellow, his father and mother being here in that way quite unexpectedly is about the most complete confirmation that you could possibly have of such a story. I know Miss Mallinder expected that he would come for the first night on Saturday, because she told me particularly to keep a stall in the second row for him—the stall he generally has. Jove! what an upset if it's true! And what a darned fool Alison must be!"

"Well, don't give me as the authority, that's all," said Gifford Cox. "It may be true or it may not. I only tell you for what it is worth, and as that chap told me. Do you know the father and mother?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then you'd better go up and pay your respects to them."

"I will. That's a good idea."

The idea was no sooner received than acted upon. Aubrey Brandon went round to the little private door which gave access to the front of the house from the stage, and made his way to the box in which were the Archdeacon and Mrs. Alison. They received him with much cordiality, praised the play, and said extremely pleasant things of the management generally, and of Kit in particular.

"Are you staying in town long?" he asked.

"No, only a few days."

"Won't you be here for our *première* on Saturday?"

"I am afraid not," said the Archdeacon. "Saturday is an awkward day for me, you see."

"My dear, I think we ought to come," said Mrs. Alison. "Will there be room?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, there won't be room, but we must manage to make it," said Aubrey Brandon, with a laugh. "We are always rather hard put to it on a first

night, and this time there is an unusual rush for seats. Miss Mallinder kept one stall for her husband, but I am not sure whether she kept two or not. I will ask her."

"No, no, don't ask her," said Mrs. Alison, rather nervously. "No—I will tell her that if it is convenient—she understands me so well, you know, Mr. Brandon—I shouldn't like to put her about in any way, she has so much on her mind just now. I will tell her myself that possibly if she can do with us, we will remain in town for the occasion."

The lady's eagerness and nervousness was so apparent that Aubrey Brandon went out of the box presently fully of opinion that Gifford Cox's story was true. He went back to his place in the wings and stood there watching Kit narrowly.

And presently, when she came off, she said to him,—

"I see you've been up to speak to my father- and mother-in-law."

"Yes," he replied. "I have been trying to persuade them to come on Saturday. I think they would like to."

"They said that they did not think it would be possible, when I asked them," said Kit, in reply. "What about my box?"

"Oh, we have put four people in that. Did you keep one stall or two for your husband?"

"I kept one," said Kit, shortly, "but he won't be here."

"Really? Can't he get leave?"

For a moment she looked as if she was going to break down, then by an effort she pulled herself together, and said,—

"Look here, Aubrey, you may as well know first as last. They only want to come on Saturday night out of kindness to me, and to give me their countenance. Gregory has left me."

"Then it is true !" he exclaimed.

"Then you had heard it. Ah, I might have known that it would not be a secret long. Yes, it's all true. Then we must find room for them somewhere, because it is just as well that the world should know that they didn't blame me, and that they mean to stick to me. How can you manage it?"

"Oh, well, there is the one stall, and there is sure to be another left or brought back again, or something. I will change the seats about so that they have stalls together. We can't give them a box, they're all gone; but I'll manage it all right."

"That will be very nice," said Kit; "they will quite understand. It is much better that they should be here. And now, Aubrey, don't talk to me about it. I can't go into details. Just treat me as if it hadn't happened, will you?"

"My dear, of course I will," he replied. "I won't even say what I think."

"No, don't."

She put out her hand and laid it gratefully in his, then turned and went off swiftly to her dressing-room.

Two minutes after Gifford Cox came off in his turn.

"Well," he said, "have you found anything out?"

"Yes, yes, it's all true enough; but she asked me to treat her as if it hadn't happened. They're here"—with a jerk of his thumb towards the royal box—they're here so that they may let the world know that they are standing by her."

"What is she going to do?" Gifford Cox inquired.

"To do? I don't know that she's going to do anything. What do you mean?"

"I mean, is she going to divorce him?"

"I know nothing—I don't know. I only know that the whole story is true. She looks pretty cut up, naturally she is cut up; and she begged me to make no

fuss, to treat her exactly as if nothing had happened at all. I can't tell you anything else."

"Oh, it's all right; I'm not curious. I only asked in a natural kind of way, old fellow," said the other, a little hurriedly. "One can't help being interested in such things, you know, particularly when they come into one's own immediate sphere, into one's own inner circle. I can't understand what a fellow could want more. But he always seemed to me an ill-conditioned sort of a brute."

"You knew him, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes; I was his fag at Eton. I liked him no better then than I like him now. Well, I must be off." And he, in his turn, went quickly away.

Perhaps never had the famous terrace scene been enacted so beautifully as on that memorable evening, when Kit had but a few hours before been made aware of the enormous change which had come about in her life. Yet Gifford Cox did not by word or look give her the smallest indication that he had heard the latest news. He talked to her during the little time that they had to make talk—lovers' talk—only of the most impersonal and distant subjects, and yet, as he drew her hands against his breast, she could not help feeling that his heart was beating in hard, irregular throbs, which contrasted strangely with the measured quiet of his tones. Something told her that he knew, and yet he said nothing of what was uppermost in both of their minds.

Such events, however, are not kept long secret from the world. Before another day had gone by it was very generally known in London that Miss Mallinder's husband had left her for another. Then, little by little, the whole story came out; of how he had been quartered not far from Bandon Towers; how he had got enamoured of the beautiful cousin of the Duchess; then how they had flown together. Nor was it long before the world

knew—not the outside world, of course, but that inner ring which constitutes one's world in London—that Archdeacon Alison had taken his beautiful daughter-in-law to a celebrated lawyer to find what chance there was of her obtaining an immediate divorce. Chance of this there was, of course, none ; and so the man of law quickly informed the dignitary of the Church. He explained to the Archdeacon and to Kit the process by which in time she might be released from a bond which had already been broken, but from which she was not free.

“Dear Archdeacon,” said Kit, when the man of law had finished speaking, “you can do just what you think is right, just what you think is best. For myself, I don't care one way or the other ; I will do anything that you like, or that you wish.”

“But do you mean to tell me,” said the Archdeacon, indignantly, “that in a case of this kind, where the desertion is apparent, where it is absolute, where the husband's own family, his wife, all accept it as an accomplished fact, do you mean to tell me that you have to go through the formality of proving legal desertion and all that sort of thing?”

“Indeed I do, Mr. Archdeacon,” said the lawyer.

“It is an iniquitous thing,” began the Archdeacon.

“Ah, the law of divorce is in a very iniquitous state, but it is the law, and one must abide by it. I have seen so much misery and unhappiness from this very point that I would but too gladly have the law altered. There is, however, no help for it, and the very wisest thing you and Mrs. Gregory Alison can do is to simply put the matter into our hands to carry through in the way which will be the least annoying to her. It is a question of time, and nothing can alter that, so long as all the parties are alive.”

“I really think that would be the best,” said the Archdeacon, anxiously. “What do you say, my child?”

“I don’t care, Archdeacon,” said Kit; “you can do as you like.”

“You would rather be free?”

“Yes, I would rather be free, because I can never take Gregory back, and it is better that he should be able to marry the other lady as soon as possible, because, until he does so, of course he must remain at variance with you and his mother.”

“I suppose,” said the lawyer, turning with a deprecating air to Kit, “I suppose that you would not like to plead cruelty?”

“Cruelty! From my husband!” she exclaimed; then laughed outright for the first time since the news had come upon her. “I could hardly do that,” she said; “Gregory was never unkind to me in his life.”

CHAPTER XXIX

HEART OR SWORD?

GREGORY ALISON did not return to his regiment. Under the circumstances, of course, he could hardly do so, as they had still another year to remain in the same quarters where he had met Mona Beresford. He could not take her back so near to Bandon Towers, and they were both so hopelessly in love with each other that even his much-longed-for command sank into insignificance beside the possibility of being parted from her. So he sent in his papers, and the White Horse knew him no more. He took her to Harkaway Castle, but they did not show themselves about in the neighbourhood, which was the wisest thing under the circumstances that they could do; and then he followed the usual expedient of a man who wishes to keep a lady out of sight of the world

which has known her—he bought a yacht and prepared to start for an indefinite absence from his native shores.

It was before they started on this cruise that Gregory had an interview with his father. They met in London at the old gentleman's hotel; Mrs. Alison refused to be present. Of the two it was the Archdeacon who looked the most uncomfortable, and who seemed the most put out. Gregory was radiantly happy, *débonnaire*, wholly unabashed. The Archdeacon positively blushed as they met.

“I was obliged to ask you to meet me, sir,” Gregory said, in the friendliest possible manner, “before I leave England, because I may be absent some time, and it is absolutely necessary that I should leave some one in charge of my affairs that I can trust—upon whom I can rely. I have given Searchem every instruction that I can think of with regard to the estate, but I want you to hold my power of attorney, and to be very careful what you sign on my behalf. I have made a new will, and I have left Harkaway to Maurice in the event of my death.”

“I hope that you have made suitable provision for—the—the lady—the lady,” said the Archdeacon, stammering a little over the word, and heightening his voice with each repetition.

“I have made a large settlement on Miss Beresford,” said Gregory, speaking quite calmly, as if his relations with Miss Beresford were the most ordinary thing in the world. “Searchem has attended to all that—Searchem and the Duke's people.”

“And—and—Kit—your wife?”

“Well, I—I haven't made any provision for her. She is very well off, and I take it that she would prefer that I did not do so. She is extremely well off herself; besides, it would be a little invidious, wouldn't it, with a lady who is trying her best to get rid of me, to be leaving her

legacies and so on? By-the-bye, you'll excuse me if I light a cigarette, won't you?"

I think that without that cigarette the Archdeacon would have got through the interview without being roused to boiling point. If a trifle, it represented to him an amount of callousness which shocked and revolted him.

"I—I didn't intend to speak of your wife," he began.

"Much better not," said Gregory; "nothing that can be said can alter anything."

"There are some things," thundered the Archdeacon, "that must be said, and this is one of them. You clearly understand that your mother and I, from the first moment, determined that we would stand by your wife in the sight of the whole world."

"Oh, yes," said Gregory, very indifferently; "but you know Kit is very well able to take care of herself."

"I know nothing of the kind," said the Archdeacon. "I know that I married you to this lady, and you have deserted her basely. She has been the most perfect of wives."

"Well, yes, she has; perhaps just a shade too perfect. It gets trying after a time, you know, living up to it."

"Oh, Gregory! Oh, Gregory! To think that I should ever live——"

"Yes, sir, I know exactly what you are going to say; I anticipated it before I asked for this interview; but it is a little late in the day to go into that kind of thing, and perhaps, after a time, you will feel that as things are they are best."

"But you used to be fond of her," said the Archdeacon, suddenly dropping the archidiaconal tone, and becoming Gregory's father all at once.

"You are quite right, sir; I used to be, and am still, awfully fond of her; but in a completely different way to what I am of Miss Beresford. To tell you the truth,"

he went on, suddenly becoming confidential, "it was the beastly narrowness of the life I couldn't stand."

"The narrowness, did you say? The narrowness? I fail to take you; I don't understand. The narrowness of Kit's life?"

"That was what I said, sir. You don't know how narrow a life an actress lives. They call it wide, because they don't pay afternoon calls, and they don't go to church on Sunday; but in reality it is a far narrower life than we are used to living. Just at first it seems that there is something very free, something very unfettered in the life which is led by people who make the stage the chief end and aim of their existence. When Kit came down to stay with me she was bored to death because she had to go and do the civil to all the women who had been civil to her. It was what she called a narrow life to observe the outward decencies of society, as you must do if you are in society at all. And at first I am bound to say that I sympathised with her. And then I got to understand what a narrow, cramped existence hers really was. When I had leave, I always had to eat my dinner at an ungodly hour that upset my digestion because she had to go to the theatre; either that or to dine alone—and let her dine alone. I always had either to seek my own amusement in the evening without her, or else to go and watch the same piece time after time until I was bored to death, and could not even admire her as I would to-night. And when she did go out anywhere with me, I always had to do the civil to a lot of cads that she said would be useful to her—fellows one couldn't ask to the mess-table—impossible people. But they were useful, and they had to be made much of, and, by Jove, I had to do it. She always had to think of everything she ate and drank and wore, to count every word she said, for fear of giving offence to somebody. Oh, I couldn't stand the horrid narrowness of the life—it maddened me! And

then, Kit was so wrapped up in her acting that she didn't care anything more about me ; and she was always worrying me to leave the Service, and I didn't want to leave the Service——”

“ But you have left it ! ”

“ I have, that is true, sir ; but I never felt for Miss Mallinder as I feel for Miss Beresford. I would count it happiness to give up a great deal for Miss Beresford, a great deal more than a mere command. If you could see her——”

“ I have no wish to see her,” said the Archdeacon. “ Neither has your mother, neither have your sisters.”

“ There is no occasion ; she doesn't wish to see them,” said Gregory, haughtily.

“ I have no doubt that Miss Beresford does not wish to see us,” said the Archdeacon, very stiffly ; “ we would indeed be ill-fitting company for a lady such as she is.”

“ I don't know that you would get on,” said Gregory. “ Probably not. At all events, we will not quarrel over that, as Miss Beresford has no wish to be received by my people, or even to prevent my seeing them. She is quite indifferent on the subject, she only thinks of me. I entreat you not to quarrel with me to-day. I am going away for a long time. I am sorry that my marriage has not turned out more to your satisfaction, but it is not entirely my fault, and I take it that it is more honest to do what I have done than to go on wearing a chain that galls at every step. I don't know whether it galled Kit ; I do know that it galled me. Between ourselves, I don't think she cared very much ; at all events she is anxious to release herself from me—so my lawyers tell me.”

“ I don't know,” said the Archdeacon, “ that she is actually that. We went to her—your mother and I—as soon as we knew what had happened. She made no fuss, it is true ; but then, she is not the kind of girl who would make a noisy fuss, and when I said to her that she would,

of course, wish to free herself, she said yes, she might as well, because it would be better if you married the other lady as soon as you could. Not many women, I think, my son, would take such a tone at such a moment. And you must excuse me if I say to you that I think you have made a great mistake. Laying aside the heinous wickedness of the offence you have committed against morality, putting that question entirely upon one side, I think that you have been greatly mistaken and sorely ill-advised to allow yourself to leave such a wife—a wife with whom you could find no fault, excepting that you had to be civil to certain people who were useful to her.”

“You may be right,” said Gregory, shortly, “I don’t say that you are not ; but the die is cast. There is no going back again. Even if I were free now, she would not take me back ; and if she would, I should despise her too much to care to go. We are as we are. It is easy for you, who have not had the particular kind of temptation which has assailed me, to say that I am wholly wrong. Well, perhaps I am. At all events I will, and indeed I must, abide by what I have done, and for the moment I am content. By-the-bye, Searchem tells me it will be years before Kit can get her divorce.”

“It is a process which takes time,” said the Archdeacon ; “so I am told. At the end of two years she will have to apply for a restitution of conjugal rights.”

“It seems awfully humiliating,” said Gregory.

“It is all humiliating,” replied the Archdeacon, in his most sententious tones.

Then the interview came to an end.

“You are my son,” said the Archdeacon, “and therefore I will shake hands with you, because I have always held it as a theory that parents should be ready to receive their children back at any time, no matter what they have done, or what there happens to be against them ; because nothing can take away the tie of blood. I will take your

hand, Gregory ; but if you were not my son I should refuse it."

Under almost any other circumstances Gregory Alison would have flung aside the proffered hand ; as it was, he took it, muttered his thanks, and with a hasty good-bye left the room.

The Archdeacon sat down at the table and cried like a child.

After this, Gregory Alison simply passed out of the life of those who had been, up to that time, his nearest and dearest. The yacht *Mona* sailed away, and, I had almost said, was heard of no more. Messrs. Searchem, the good old family lawyers who had charge of Captain Alison's affairs, were the only people who received any news of the *Mona* and its occupants. To them and to his bankers Gregory wrote with tolerable regularity. *Mona Beresford*, now called Mrs. Alison, held no communication whatever with a single person whom she had known in her former life.

Outwardly the life of Miss Mallinder the actress was not altered in any way whatsoever. She had no correspondence to keep up with an absent husband, but the daily routine of her existence went on in precisely the same way as it had always done. When she could get away for a Sunday, she went to Little Gracethorpe, as she had done in former times, or to stay with her sister-in-law Constance, now Mrs. Annesley. Violet Alison spent a great deal of her time at the Belvedere, just as she had been used to do ; she never wrote to Gregory, never mentioned him or his companion, and the only thing that happened out of the ordinary run of life was that, about three months after Gregory's departure, the Duchess of Bandon went to see Gregory Alison's wife.

"Dear Mrs. Alison," she said, when she was ushered unexpectedly into Kit's presence, "I did not send in my

name, because I thought that it was just possible you would not receive me."

"Oh, but why?" said Kit.

"Why? My dear Mrs. Alison, the reason is, alas, too obvious. I was determined that you should see me, because I wanted to make you really feel that I had no hand, no voice, nothing whatever, to do in the dreadful thing that has happened, that has uprooted all our lives, especially yours, poor child. I assure you, dear Mrs. Alison, the whole affair came like a thunderbolt upon me. Of course, the people in the house said, when it had happened and there was no mistake about it, that they had seen it all along; but then, you know, there are always a certain number of people who are wise after the event—it is so easy to be that. I told them, and I meant it, that they might have taken a leaf out of the marriage service, and either told me at the time, or for ever after held their peace. Will you believe me, Mrs. Alison, it was, upon my honour, as great a blow to me as it could have been to you; not the same trouble, of course—I would not pretend to say that for one moment; not as great a shock, but quite as great a surprise."

"Dear Duchess," said Kit, "why should I not believe you? I don't suppose for one moment that you liked to have your cousin run away with my husband; do as we will, it is a blot upon both of us for the rest of our lives. A blot upon me that I was not, perhaps, as much to him as I might have been; a blot upon you because you did not see what was going on. But if you did not see, how can you be to blame? I shall never dream of blaming you. Besides," she went on with a sigh, "all the blame in the world will not give us back what we had once."

"You will let me be your friend?" said the Duchess, half-hesitatingly.

"My friend! Don't you think, Duchess, that, however kind you are, it will always be painful to us to meet?

When we meet let us be always pleasant and civil and kind, and if we have the chance, either of us, of doing a good turn to the other, let us make a compact to do it ; but to be friends—isn't that impossible? After a while, when—when—when your cousin is—oh, well, when she is reinstated——”

“Nothing can reinstate her,” said the Duchess.

“No, perhaps not, not in the eyes of the world, that would be impossible ; but with you, to a certain extent. You and the Duke will forgive what she has done, you will overlook this foolish thing as far as you can, and you will forgive them. When they are—married—I may as well say the word, although Gregory is really my husband yet—I mean is legally my husband yet—you will forgive him, and you will ask them to Bandon Towers, and they will ask you to Harkaway, and then it would be very awkward if I were in any sense intimate with you. There is nothing to be gained by it ; we are better apart, you and I. I appreciate your kindness to the very full, I understand your generous motive, but I think we shall be better if we make no pretence at intimacy ; it can only lead to difficulties and, in a certain sense, to disagreeables. But I thank you, yes, with all my heart I thank you, and shall always do so.”

For a moment the Duchess was silent. She was young and beautiful ; she had the warm Irish heart, as she had the blue-grey Irish eyes, and there were tears upon her dark lashes as she put out her hands to the actress whose rightful place her cousin had usurped.

“Dear Mrs. Alison,” she said, “I wish that I could have stopped this ; I wish that you could be my friend. I shall always think of you as true and good—never for your talents. Perhaps you are right. Perhaps it would be better not to try and encompass what must be almost impossible. But, my dear, I would like to kiss you, just once, for yourself and for your goodness.”

She stooped from her greater height and kissed the actress very tenderly ; then the door opened, and Violet Alison, wearing a big hat with many feathers and much wrapped in furs, came unexpectedly into the room.

“ Oh, I did not know you had any one here, Kit,” she said, half in apology for the suddenness of her entrance.

For a moment Kit hesitated.

“ Don’t go, Violet,” she said ; “ I—I—didn’t know whether you were in or not. This is the Duchess of Bandon. Duchess, this is my sister-in-law, Violet Alison.”

CHAPTER XXX

LOVE-MAKING

THE London season that year was an especially busy and brilliant one, and in the social rush and turmoil which a brilliant season means, the Alison-Beresford scandal was as completely forgotten as if it had never taken place—forgotten, that is to say, by the outside world.

The current of affairs at the Grosvenor was undisturbed. The piece put on in the early part of the year filled the bill until quite late in the season, when, by general request, other pieces in the Grosvenor repertoire were given an airing that the public might see them again. They, that is Miss Mallinder and Aubrey Brandon, had arranged a tour for the autumn and midwinter, opening at Manchester in the middle of October. Their season at the Grosvenor would end with the last day of July, and the theatre was let for the time that they would be away. This would give them all the chance of two months’ solid holiday, which, so far as Miss Mallinder, Aubrey Brandon, and Gifford Cox were concerned, had become an absolute

necessity. It was during the revival of "A Harvest of Roses" that Gifford Cox first mentioned the subject of his holiday to his manageress.

"Where are you going to spend your holidays?" he asked, when they were making talk in the famous terrace scene.

"I am going to Switzerland and the Italian lakes," she replied.

"Oh, are you? Are you going quite alone?"

"No; my sister-in-law, Violet Alison, is going with me."

"How charming! I think you are quite wise to get right away from England, it is so much greater change to be in a different country, hearing a different language, living a different life, and gaining new impressions while you get mental rest and relaxation."

"What are you going to do?" she inquired.

"I? I have not the least idea as yet! I have fifty invitations, none of which I mean to accept. I can't stand going to country houses and having to be *en évidence* the whole time; I must have a holiday from every kind of duty. To tell you the truth, I have never been so fagged in my life as I am just now. I don't know whether I shall not run out to America and back just for the trip."

Kit shook her head resolutely.

"There would be very small holiday in that," she said, with decision. "Why, you would be the whole time on board of a vessel with people who know who you are and what you are; they would pester you to death to read or to recite or do other horrible things. It would be like a regular house party, with the chance of earning yourself a reputation for real sulkiness if you did not make yourself agreeable all round."

"You are right," said he. Then he received his cue, and the conversation came to an end.

In truth, it was not so much his work as the effort of

continual repression which was affecting him so strongly. In an ordinary way Gifford Cox would have told Kit of his love months before, but there was always about her a sense of reserve, always a certain air of distancy, which kept him resolutely at arm's length. He did not know, he had not the slightest idea, whether she cared for him or not ; he only knew that he was consumed by an overwhelming, devouring, all-pervading passion for her. It would have been easier for him if he had not been in the same theatre with her, or even if he had not been so prominently to the front in the same piece. As their position was, all the interest—all the main interest, I should say—hung upon the two ; the great love interest in each play lay in their hands. It was a hard situation for a man over head and ears in love, as he was, to have to be night after night, week after week, month after month, making counterfeit love to the woman whom he would naturally have made love to in her own person.

After the disappearance from the scene of Gregory Alison, Gifford Cox's visits to the Belvedere had been greatly diminished. At first he had shrunk from inflicting his presence upon Kit in her hour of desolation ; then some instinct told him that he would be wiser and more considerate towards her if he was associated with her in his private capacity as little as possible. Not for worlds would he have done anything which would prevent her obtaining her freedom, and if he were known to be at her house as frequently as he had formerly been, there was no knowing that such a circumstance might not count against her legitimate interests. So he scarcely ever went there alone. When Violet Alison was staying with Kit he took the opportunity of paying his respects to the two ladies, and, partly from his extreme reticence and carefulness towards her, it entered into Kit's mind that Violet was the attraction which brought him to her house.

After this idea had come into her mind she watched her

sister-in-law closely. Certainly it seemed to be true, her suspicions appeared to be well founded. He invariably made his appearance as soon as Violet had settled herself down. And Violet, who, to tell the truth, always looked upon Gifford Cox in his private capacity of the Honourable Edward Winnington, always flushed up prettily crimson, and appeared her most charming self. She, of course, knew nothing of that passionate declaration on the way down to Kingston, she knew nothing of Gifford Cox's overwhelming love for Kit Mallinder. How should she have done? So the little game played itself on. In the fulness of her self-abnegation Kit even went the length of making opportunities for the pair, who seemed to be drifting surely and steadily along the river of propinquity to the high sea of marriage.

It would be very hard to adequately describe her feelings at this time. She was wed, yet no wife ; she was alone, yet not free ; a blighted being, with whom love had sadly gone wrong. It was curious that she never blamed Gregory, never even in her own heart. He had loved her once, of that there could be no doubt ; she only doubted whether he had loved her with the overwhelming affection which he seemed to have for the other one, that other wife, who had proved her affection for him so much more really than ever Kit had felt herself able or willing to do. For him Mona Beresford had given up the world, while Kit had refused point blank to give up one single thing. "I was wedded to my art," she told herself, sadly, "and it cost me my husband."

During this time she gave a great deal of thought to the events of the past, much more than to the probable occurrences of the future ; and the more she thought about her relations with Gregory, the more certain was she that neither he nor she ever really felt, the one for the other, anything approaching to love—real love—that divine feeling which dwarfs all other senses, which counts

as dross all interests but its own. "We could not have done," she argued to herself. "Why, people who love would give up home, position, wealth, everything for love, and for love alone—as she did. I never felt like that! I never, even for a moment, entertained the idea of giving up the stage for Gregory. Gregory never gave up what was but an idea for me—the hope that he would one day be in command of his regiment. We were happy enough while it lasted, oh, yes, but it was the happiness that takes what there is to take, the love that accepted without question, made no effort, was prepared for no sacrifice; it was a passive rather than an active love."

She had come, during those few months of loneliness, to believe that happiness of a personal kind was not for her. "After all," she argued, "I have had my glory; I have lived; I live in every character I portray! My own personal Kit Mallinder life is lived every night when they call me to crown me afresh with success and fame; for the rest, it is not for me; it is for the woman who can live in her love—live in her love alone; who can give her lover an undivided heart, who can rest content and satisfied to live one perpetual sweet romance. As for the other one," her thoughts reverting back to that night when Gifford Cox had spoken out, "as for that other one—he never meant it! He was carried away. We make love so often to each other behind the footlights that he forgot, and mixed up the *rôle* of Gifford Cox with the *rôle* of 'A Harvest of Roses.' It was natural enough. He will marry Violet, and they will be happy—oh, so happy, because she will be his wife only! She has no ambitions, there will be no division of interest, she will be all his, his only, his alone; and she will value him—I hope she will value him—as such a man deserves to be valued. I suppose it would be unnatural if my husband had valued me as it seems only natural and proper a wife

should value an artist husband. Perhaps, if Gregory had been content to sit down and sink himself in my life, I should not have cared for him as much even as I did. And yet it would have been wholly sweet, and I should have been ever grateful for such devotion. But it would have been too much to expect of any man. Well, well, I have had my one earnest try at marriage ; I have had my flash of a more real and genuine passion ; both have failed me. For the rest of my life I will live for my art, for my name. I will live my own life—alone. He will marry Violet, and I shall get used to it by-and-by ; it's nothing when you are used to it !”

And yet, when Gifford Cox came again, and she saw Violet Alison flush up and show off all her graces and charms, she did feel it ; she could not help feeling it. She was not the Stoic that she made herself out to be ; she was a veritable woman in spite of her art—the art that was supposed to absorb every feminine weakness, every womanly desire. But she had set her feet on a certain path by a promise to herself, which to her was sacred, that she would stand by and, as a sort of punishment for her own shortcomings, assist in the happiness of her sister-in-law and the man whose love would have been wholly precious to her ; and although the path was thorny and the way steep and difficult, she trod it with firm, unflinching footsteps, and crushed down one difficulty after another until she had reached almost the highest pinnacle of self-abnegation.

“Where are you going for your holiday, Mr. Cox?” cried Violet Alison one afternoon, when he was, as usual, at the Belvedere.

“I don't know, Miss Violet, I really don't know,” he replied. “I know where I want to go, but one cannot always do what one wants.”

“And what do you want to do?” she asked. She had a little way wholly peculiar to herself of clasping her

hands and putting them down upon her knees, and then of looking down at the rings which adorned them. They were small and pretty hands, and her rings, some of them Kit's gifts, were of great beauty. "And what do you want to do?" she asked.

"I would like to go to Switzerland and the Italian lakes," he answered. He did not look at either of them, but sat staring up at a picture, which, by-the-bye, only his eyes saw.

For a moment there was dead silence; then Violet looked up from her hands at her sister-in-law, and Kit, with a certain effort, looked from Violet to Gifford Cox.

"You mean," she said, "that you would like to go with us? I don't think that you could very well do that; but Switzerland and the Italian lakes are as open to you as they are to us, or to any one else. Because we are going there it does not make our route our exclusive property, and if we meet you on the road, we shall neither of us pretend that we never saw you before."

"Practically that would be going with us," said Violet. "I think it would be extremely jolly. We might take you on as a sort of courier, Mr. Cox; what do you think? Send you on to Paris so that you could make all arrangements for us there; then you could shop a little with us, do a little sight-seeing with us, and one evening you could go on ahead to Geneva. We would start from Paris the next morning, and we should find our rooms all ready and some one at the station to welcome us. It would be delightful. It would have all the advantages of having a first-rate courier with nothing to pay him!"

Gifford Cox jumped up with a pretended sudden interest in the clock. "It would be delightful, Miss Violet," he said, "delightful. But I must be off to my dinner, or Aubrey Brandon will leave no Gifford Cox to act as courier to two charming ladies." He took her

hand in farewell, then made two steps to where Kit was sitting by the open window. "Did you mean that?" he said, as he held out his hand to her.

She raised her eyes, by what an effort Heaven and herself only knew, as she answered,—

"Surely ; why should I not mean it?"

And with no more than "Good-bye," Gifford Cox left them.

"That would be too lovely," said Violet, as the door closed behind him. "I have always rather a dread of two women, even with such a wonderful woman as Maitland with them, going about by themselves. It is safe enough, dear, but dreadfully dull. Now, Mr. Gifford Cox is a person—a celebrity ; I shall be the envy of half the young women in London."

Kit got up from her chair and stood a moment looking fixedly out of the window.

"Yes," she said, in a strained, strange voice, "you will be envied of many women, dear. But bear in mind the old verse about a house divided against itself." She turned abruptly and left the room.

"Now, what did I say to touch her to the quick like that?" asked Violet Alison of herself. "I never mentioned Gregory, I never hinted at Gregory ! 'A house divided against itself !' Poor girl ! Oh, Gregory—what a fool you were ! I could beat you, idiot that you were, to throw over such a wife as Kit Mallinder !"

Well, in due course the three started off on their holidays exactly as had been planned by the vivacious Violet in her careless talk with her sister-in-law and Gifford Cox. He went ahead to Paris, they followed the next day. They had a glorious time, and if Kit suffered, well, nobody knew it but herself, and, after all, what is locked in one's own heart is nothing to any one else. Poor Kit ! she trod the thorny path, and never a thorn did her bleeding feet escape. She scaled the steep

and difficult way with unceasing pain, unending sadness.

And at Geneva they foregathered with a man, a friend of Gifford Cox, who made a fourth to their party—one Richard Hamlyn, a Devonshire squire off for a jaunt for no better reason than that he wished to get out of certain country house visits to which he had been bidden. He was young and rich and big and rollicking, and, truth to tell, he fell in love with Violet Alison the first moment that he saw her. And Violet? Ah, well, if ever an arrant flirt was born into the world she was one, and she played off the one against the other, and the other against the one, until the soul of Kit Mallinder was sick within her.

“Violet,” she said one day, “you ought not to flirt as you do with Mr. Hamlyn.”

“Flirt!” said Violet; “my dear, I never flirted in my life. I don’t know how!”

“Don’t you? Well, then, you went just about as near as you very well could when you set off on a long country walk with him, leaving poor Gifford Cox as you did.”

“My dear, poor Gifford Cox was exceedingly happy and comfortable; he looked so grateful to his friend for having taken me off his hands for a little while. You know perfectly well that Gifford Cox cares no more about me than if he had never seen me.”

“Ah, you say so,” said Kit.

“Well, dear, he is very well able to take care of himself; I don’t think you need worry about him. He is all very well—I like him extremely—I like the other one—I like them both.”

“You can’t marry them both!” Kit cried.

“Heaven forbid!” was Violet’s prompt reply. Then she changed her tone. “Leave it all alone, my dear child; leave it alone. It never does any good to inter-

fere in such matters. Let all these little things work out their own salvation."

"Violet!"

"Yes, but I mean it."

"You are incorrigible!" Kit cried.

However, incorrigible or not, she went on her own wilful, capricious way, now taking a flower from Gifford Cox, now accepting a basket of fruit from Richard Hamlyn, now going for an expedition with the one, then planning some pleasure with the other. And in the end Richard Hamlyn asked her to marry him—to go from Little Gracethorpe Rectory to be the mistress of the old Devonshire manor house, where she would be his queen. And Violet Alison, all her little coquetries, all her little airs and graces having disappeared into thin air, answered Yes.

Kit was almost beside herself when she heard the truth.

"You have accepted him?" she cried.

"I have."

"And you care for him?"

"I do."

"And you are going to marry him?"

"I am."

"And what about the other one?"

"What other one?"

"Mr. Cox."

"Oh!" Violet's tone was suddenly comprehensive.

"Oh, I don't think you need worry about him, dear. He took both my hands when we told him the news, wished me all the happiness the earth could give, clapped Dick on the back, called him old fellow, said he'd be his best man, and—I don't think you need worry. He hides it very well if he ever felt anything."

"You are cruel, Violet."

"No, I don't think so; I don't think I am cruel; I don't wish to be cruel; I don't think he cares. If he

does, I can't help it. He had the first chance ; he should have asked me sooner. Mind you, I don't know that I would ever have taken him, and I don't think he ever had any intention of asking me—no. Anyway, there's Dick looking for me. I must go. Bye-bye."

As she disappeared round the corner of the hotel, Gifford Cox came out onto the balcony where Kit was sitting.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked.

CHAPTER XXXI

RELUCTANCE

WHEN Gifford Cox asked Kit if she had heard the news, she rose up hurriedly, her face full of concern, her eyes shining with infinite pity and dismay.

"Oh, Gifford !" she said ; "oh, Gifford, I am so sorry—I am so sorry !"

He looked at her in absolute astonishment.

"You are sorry !" he exclaimed. "But why? Dick Hamlyn is one of the best fellows I ever knew in my life ; his family is irreproachable, he is extremely wealthy, he is good-looking, he is madly in love—what more would you have?"

"But you?" she faltered.

"I?" A little smile crept about the corners of his clean-shaven mouth. "My dear, were you thinking that I had an eye to the radiant Violet?"

"Of course I was."

The smile deepened into a laugh.

"How well I must have played my part," he said. "Is it possible that I deceived even you? Why, my dear, my dear, did you think that I was shamming that

night on the way down to Hampton Wick? Did you think that I did not mean every word that I said? Did you dream for one moment that, having loved the sun, I would be content with the mere reflection? Oh, how little you have seen, or how well I must have played my part!"

"You care for me?" she breathed incredulously.

"Is it likely that a man who had cared once for you would look at another? Oh!" he exclaimed, as she shrank back and put her hand involuntarily over her eyes, "oh! forgive me, forgive me; I said it without thinking, or rather, I spoke for myself. Well, having broken the ice, I will say all that is in my mind. Kit, dearest, my own and only love, I spoke for myself only. I have loved the sun, and only the sun will satisfy me in the future. We cannot all love the same thing, we cannot all hold the same ideals. I have never spoken of Alison to you before. He could not have loved you as I do; he was content in a life that suffocated me——"

"He loved soldiering better than me," put in Kit, "but not so well as the other one."

"Well, that's as it may be; in any case, it is no use, although I have held my tongue all these months, although I have never hinted a word of my desires, have never spoken of Alison, never, so far as I know, alluded to the past in any way whatsoever, it is no use for you and me to be shamming with each other and making believe that there is nothing between us. I was not sure that you cared for me until a few days ago."

"And what told you then?"

"I can hardly tell you—a look, an inflection of your voice, a something that told me that I had not loved in vain all these hard and trying months. Oh! Miss Violet is very pretty, and she is very bright and winsome, and Hamlyn is gone, clean gone; but she attracts me no more than the little kitten, which gambols about the

floor, attracts me beyond the moment while I watch it play."

"And I——" she began.

"You? Kit, you and I were made for one another; you and I came into the world twin halves of one soul! It was a mistake that you married Alison—mistakes are made every day in that way. You know that it was the greatest mistake either of you ever made. It is hard, almost impossible, to believe that Alison did not appreciate you when he had you, but that is his nature. He is no more responsible for that than I am responsible for liking you better than Violet Alison."

"And you really love me?" Kit asked.

"No," he said, "I adore you, I worship you, I idolise you. Love is too poor a term."

"But do you think," she said, still incredulous of her own good fortune, "do you think that you will always feel the same? Don't you think that there is something about me that makes a man tire? Gregory said just the same as you say—he could not live without me. He wanted to go to India making sure that I was safe—that nobody else would come along and steal the jewel that he coveted. Don't you think that if—if you were married to me, you would feel the same that he felt?"

"I don't. I am certain that I should not. Alison and I are wholly different in temperament. You and I have every interest in common; with Alison you had every interest in contradiction. Your life obliges you to keep in London, his was to drag about in country quarters; your interests lie chiefly with unfashionable people, his—well, a soldier's chief interest is in country house invitations, big shoots, the notice of Royalty, and the apex of his ambition is being commanded to dine and sleep at Windsor. You both had the same apex to your ambitions—he in being commanded to dine at Windsor, you in being commanded to play there, but up to that point

the road is wholly different ; you could only meet each other there. And as he was never commanded to dine and sleep, and you were never commanded to play, your roads—the ways of your interests—never met.”

“ But—but,” she began, “ Gifford, has it ever struck you, did you never think, that you have fixed your affections upon a woman who is not free ? ”

“ I never forget it,” he replied.

“ Shall I ever be free ? ”

“ Surely ! ”

“ Not so sure. Do you know that there is never a day that I don't think what a dreadful course lies before me—that I have to go into court and ask for my husband to come back to me, ask him to take me back—to sue for it as a right.”

“ It is a mere technicality,” he said.

“ Oh, but is it ? Think of the humiliation ! Gifford, I assure you that sometimes when I wake in the night and think about it I could find it in my heart to wish that he—that he had struck me.”

“ My dear, you take too literal a view altogether ; it is a mere question of technicality, a means of satisfying the law. It is the only road to freedom, the only door by which you can reach the haven of happiness.”

“ It would cost so much to open it,” said she.

“ Well, that may be so, but the cost will buy so much happiness for us both ; and you must try to look ahead and think of the happiness in store, not of the mere disagreeable necessity of the moment. To me the greatest drawback is that, in any case, we must wait so long.”

“ I feel,” said she, trying hard to speak in a natural and indifferent voice, “ I feel as if I were wronging you to allow that there is any possibility of happiness for us ; I feel as if I were doing a mean and craven thing all round when I allow that I—at least, when I let you think that I, will one day marry you. Do you mean that ? ”

“Oh, my dear, how can you ask me such a question!” he exclaimed, reproachfully. “You are not kind when you imply a doubt of that sort. You know that my only earthly hope is that I may one day marry you! As for being mean all round—nothing you could do would be mean to Alison; he has deliberately cut his bond with you asunder, and he leaves it for you to set yourself and him legally free, to form what fresh ties you both will. He has a duty before him. You have not that; but you have your life to live, and you have to live it without him. I know so well what you are feeling,” he went on. “You are beset with some kind of idea that all this wretched business is your fault. Cannot you put that out of your mind? Perhaps it was your fault, inasmuch as that you were given up to your art; so far, perhaps, it was hard upon Alison that he had a wife whose aim in life was not the same as his own. But it was equally hard upon you; and you had got so much further in your profession than he had done, or was ever likely to do in his, that the hardship fell more hardly upon you of the two. We would not go about and say, ‘We are engaged, we are going to be married as soon as we legally may be.’ No; because, I believe, the absurd law demands that you shall have no such avowed intention when you seek the freedom which your husband has already in morality and in truth given to you. Everybody knows that the marriage laws and the divorce laws are in an absurd and obsolete state. I would alter them,” he went on. “Oh, how I would radically alter everything that has to do with marriage and divorce!”

“As how?”

“Well, to begin with, I would have divorce as it stands now, excepting that the cause which allows a man to divorce his wife should be sufficient for a wife to divorce her husband; and I would have annulment with no stigma on either side. I would allow any couple who

could provide for the children of their marriage—provide for them in an adequate manner, that they should be brought up in the same sphere in which they had been born—to annul their marriage with no stigma on either side. We are told that marriages are made in heaven. I have always thought,” he said, speaking very seriously, “that heaven has proved itself a shockingly bad matrimonial agency. I have an uncle who, to my certain knowledge, has not spoken to his wife for years. They live in the same house ; they are reputed an ordinary, reasonable, decent couple ; they entertain large house-parties, and talk to each other at dinner ; talk in quite an ordinary manner, and call each other ‘my dear,’ and so on ; but, privately, they have not spoken for years, and I think that my uncle’s wife would take a visit to her private sitting-room as the most deadly insult that he could offer her. Now, why do this couple go on living such a life. Why ? Because the wife feels that if she were to leave her husband she would have the worst of it. He might give her ever such an income, she would have her title, she would have no shred of blame attached to her name, but she would lose in prestige. She would never be the same power living a separate life apart from her husband, to whom she never speaks, as she is while she is the mistress of his house. So they go on. He has other interests ; she is great on politics and the advancement of women. Poor souls ! Dragging at an odious chain from which both would be better free. How much easier and more dignified it would be could they get an annulment of their marriage—an annulment, as I said, without stigma on either side.”

“But that is an extreme case,” said Kit.

“Not at all. I could tell you of a dozen people in as many minutes, whom I know intimately, who live the lives of cats and dogs : whose marriages have proved to be the most hideous and ghastly failures. I have aired

my views to my governor and to other people, but the ordinary English character is to go on bearing the ills it knows of. That was the very phrase he quoted to me—my governor—‘Better to bear the ills’—and the rest, you know. He quoted it wrongly, and I thought it would not be filial to correct him; and then he ended up by thanking God that I was his second son and not his eldest; that as I was never likely to get into Parliament, I could never air my ideas and bring the good old constitution of England to rack and ruin. What can you do with such people? The laws that suited our fathers must be the best for them! That is all their creed. I never argue,” he ended, “but I keep my own opinions unaltered and unchanged. However, the old marriage laws will have to do for us; you and I have no choice but to abide by the wisdom of our forefathers. We must keep our precious secret a secret from the world, and—exist, until the time comes when we are free to proclaim our love broadcast. Till then, I will ask nothing of you, seek no promise, be nothing to you; and yet,” holding her hand, and looking tenderly into her eyes, “you and I will know that deep down in our hearts there is a well of love and trust which is inexhaustible.”

“But, Gifford,” she said, with an effort, “it is that dreadful act of hypocrisy—which you call a mere technicality. I don’t believe I shall ever bring myself to go through it—as I could, perhaps, easily do if I did not know you, and did not wish to be free chiefly because of you.”

“Pooh! Your lawyer will do it for you. It will all be made so easy, and, under the circumstances, they will be ever so considerate to you.”

“Yes, perhaps; and yet, to have to ask him to take me back again when I know that that other woman is there in my place! It is not that I care, it is not that I want to go back, that I grudge her the place she has

taken, the love that she has won—oh, no, believe me, no! But to have to ask, and be publicly refused. I don't think I can ever do it!"

"You will feel differently in time," he said, soothingly.

"No, I don't think I shall ever feel differently. It seems to me to be such an act of hypocrisy, of falseness, that no good can follow it. And all the world will know that my husband refused me!"

"But when the time is ripe you will not feel like that. You haven't got over all the pain, the hurt, the humiliation of Alison leaving you in the way that he did. It is, as I told you, while we are all living, the only way in which you can open the door of happiness. In any case," with a change of tone, "we need not decide to-day. The two full years must go by before you can ask for release. We have this gay young couple to take care of and to get married; we have our provincial tour, and ever so many other things to do, before we can think of each other. So, dearest—I may call you that, just for this once—we will put it all on one side for the moment."

It would be hard to tell exactly how Kit felt when she once more found herself alone in her own room. All her pulses were dancing with happiness, and yet she was not happy. She was, and she was not, satisfied with the turn of events. She was possessed of that terrible scruple that did she obtain her freedom in the usual way she would never be fit for human association again. She loved Gifford Cox with all her heart and soul; so much so that to win him by a lie seemed to her to be a desecration of all that was best and holiest in her nature. She could not look upon the act as a mere technicality. She felt herself as far off from him as she had ever been; and yet, it was joy untold to her to know for certain that he was really, irrevocably, and for ever hers.

She was from that time thrown very much more into

his society. Violet Alison wrote home to her father and mother, and Richard Hamlyn wrote likewise ; but they did not, either of them, propose to shorten their tour.

“I have written to my lawyers to meet yours at any time that you suggest,” wrote Richard Hamlyn to the Archdeacon, “so as to further any question of settlements on which they may agree. I would willingly come home at once, but Violet seems to think she is bound to Miss Mallinder. She is writing to you herself upon this point.”

And Violet wrote that, much as she longed to present her dear Dick to her father and mother, she felt that Kit was so thoroughly in need of a holiday that it would be absolutely cruel to curtail it by a single day. So she contented herself by sending several excellent photographs, and begging them to trust in her judgment, and believe that Fate had sent her the most perfect man in the world for her husband.

So the four journeyed on together, no longer making any pretence of not being of one party. The lovers were terribly lover-like, and Gifford Cox and Kit were thrown entirely upon each other's resources. It was a glorious time for them all ! The only drawback was that poor Kit was troubled from time to time with qualms of conscience, qualms that haunted her chiefly in the dark hours of the night ; which sent her down to breakfast with dark rings round her eyes and a subdued look which sometimes made Violet Alison feel that she was the most selfish girl that had ever been born.

“I believe,” she said, confidentially, to Dick Hamlyn one day, when Kit was looking more wan than usual, “I believe that she has never got over it at all. She seems to suffer more as the days go on, and when there is no work to do which will keep her mind occupied she sits and broods, and broods, and broods. It seems cruel for you and me to be so awfully, blissfully happy when

she has lost everything that made life pleasant and perfect for her."

"Was he good-looking, your brother?"

"Oh, yes, good-looking enough. A fool to throw over such a woman."

"Have you seen the other one?"

"Oh, no!"

"I thought you might have known her before. They say she is very beautiful."

"I see no fault to find with Kit's looks," Violet cried, jealously. "But it's the way with men—fickle and false, most of them are. And I hate," she exclaimed, suddenly changing her tone and relapsing into colloquial English, "I hate a man that doesn't know which side his bread is buttered on."

CHAPTER XXXII

THE YACHT "MONA"

Two Englishmen were strolling along the jetty of a little town on the Normandy coast. The time was early spring, just two years after the great tragedy of desertion had come into Kit Mallinder's life.

"Yes," was the reply of his companion, "we are having a wonderful spring this year. By-the-bye, what's that?"

The first speaker shaded his eyes with his hand, and peered out over the wide stretch of sea before them.

"It looks like an English yacht," he answered; "and a clipper at that."

They stayed at the end of the jetty, watching the white vessel make her way steadily towards them.

"She's a beauty," said one of the men to the other, as the yacht passed under them on her way into the inner harbour. "What's her name?"

The one with the keener eyes of the two peered again at the name painted on the bows. *Mona*, he made out.

The other man gave vent to a low whistle.

"By Jove, you don't say so! Let us go along the quay and get a nearer look at the lady. She is the beautiful Mona Beresford there was such a scandal about. You remember—the Alison-Beresford scandal?"

"Alison-Beresford? No, I don't remember anything about it."

"What! Not the husband of Miss Mallinder, the actress, who ran away with the Duchess of Bandon's cousin—don't you remember?"

"O-h-h, yes! They said she was the most beautiful girl in Ireland. Let us go down and try to get a glimpse of her."

The two men turned and began to walk back along the jetty.

"I wonder if she was the lady standing on the deck?"

"I suppose so. They would hardly be likely to have another lady on board with them, and that wasn't a maid."

Meantime the yacht *Mona* was gliding into the inner harbour where yachts always lay when visiting the town. Gregory Alison was standing aft, and Mona Beresford was beside him.

"It's a queer, quaint little place," she said, as they went past the picturesque French houses, with their tall gables and casement windows.

"Oh! very quaint," he replied. "I wonder if there's a decent hotel? What do you say, Wilson?"

"Only that these French Johnnies are after us for their harbour dues, sir," was the reply, with a jerk of his hand towards a boat in the water below, in which three men

were sitting. "They are going to berth us here ; it will be nice and snug and most convenient."

There was the usual running to and fro and juggling with ropes which seems necessary to the mooring of a yacht. Gregory Alison and Mona stood watching the operation with the greatest interest, and the two Englishmen, who had strolled along for the purpose of getting a good look at Mona, were able to satisfy their curiosity.

"By Jove, she's a beauty !" said one to the other in an undertone.

"I can't see her very well," said the second man ; "my sight isn't as good as yours."

Ten minutes later, however, he did have a chance of endorsing his friend's opinion, for Gregory Alison and Mona left the yacht and walked slowly together along the quay in the direction of the principal streets. She was young and tall, with a slight, elegant figure, a very beautiful likeness of her cousin, the Duchess. Her dress was of neat blue serge, her hat of sailor shape ; she wore a pink shirt and tan shoes and gloves. Nothing could have been more simple and unnoticeable than her costume, and yet every detail was so perfect and so well worn—by which I do not mean shabby, but rather shown to advantage—that she was a figure whom nobody could pass without observation. As they walked briskly away along the quay towards the town Gregory, turning to look at her, saw that her brilliant face was clouded.

"What is the matter, my beloved ?" he said, tenderly. She sighed again.

"Oh, Greg !" she said, slipping her hand under his arm, "how good it is to walk on dry land once more, isn't it ?"

"I am afraid you are very tired of the yacht ?"

"No, I am not ; I love the *Mona*, but to be always aboard of her is like living always in one's bedroom. That is all."

“You are pining to be at home again?” he said.

“I am. Greg, I long to walk about English streets, to hear English voices, to see all the commonplace English things that I used not to think much of. I’m awfully homesick, Greg.”

“Oh! by-and-by, when things are settled and arranged, we will go home. It will be a pill for you just at first, I daresay, but if it satisfies you—well, it will be worth it. Perhaps we shall have a letter by the mail to-day; there are sure to be a bagful waiting for us. I can’t think what they are doing,” he went on, impatiently, “to be so long getting things settled. I thought that it was quite easy; it always seemed so with other people. Anyway, sweetheart,” looking at her anxiously, “you are not sorry that you gave up the world for me?”

“Oh, no, surely not! It is only that we have been away so long; we seem to have travelled all the world over, everywhere but at home, and I am—I am just a bit homesick, that is all; nothing to worry about, only, as I told you, I’d like to be at home again; that’s all.”

She made a visible effort to be cheerful and herself again. It was not often that her brilliant face was clouded, or the sunny brightness of her radiant nature dimmed. Her gay and unaffected Irish nature, as a rule, was able to throw off every feeling of care or of compunction; but sometimes feelings arose which could not be stifled, and somehow, why or wherefore she could not have told, this little Norman town had aroused them all, and had set her pulses beating for the mother country which she had abandoned. She recovered her spirits as they reached the street in which the principal shops were to be found. They went gaily in and out, making purchases here and there, and finally arrived back on board of the *Mona* just as the dusk was falling.

“Have you been to the post-office?” Captain Alison, asked the steward.

"Yes, sir ; the bag is in the saloon."

"I wonder," said Gregory to Mona, "whether there will be any news."

There was a goodly bundle of letters, and he turned them out upon the table and hurriedly searched them over with nervous fingers that trembled in spite of himself. Yes, there was a letter from his lawyers—a thick and weighty one—and he tore it open, while Mona sat on the arm of his big chair and read it over his shoulder.

"DEAR SIR,"—it began,—“We duly received your last letter, of date March 25th, and note that you will be in Dieppe about the 3rd prox. We regret exceedingly to have to inform you that we have made no progress with your affairs. We have interviewed Mrs. Gregory Alison’s lawyers several times, and we are convinced that they have done their best to expedite matters in the direction that you wish. The difficulty lies in the fact that Mrs. Gregory Alison cannot bring herself to ask for a restitution of conjugal rights. Apparently this is purely a conscientious scruple, as Mrs. Gregory Alison admits to her lawyers that she would gladly be free. This unfortunate attitude on her part renders our efforts absolutely futile. We are not in a position, naturally, to do anything further in the matter ; the action must come from the other side, and if Mrs. Gregory Alison declines to proceed further we are rendered powerless. We believe that her legal advisers have done their best to overcome this scruple, because they felt that it would be better for all parties that a dissolution of your marriage should be brought about as speedily as possible. We are extremely sorry to have no better news to send you, and we will spare no efforts to try, even yet, to bring about a different state of affairs.

“We are, yours faithfully,

“SEARCHEM & Co.”

For full five minutes Gregory Alison dared not look at Mona. He sat staring at the letter, and she sat still upon the arm of his chair, her hand resting on his shoulder, her beautiful face blanched, her eyes widely dilated. Then she suddenly collapsed in a heap on the floor and hung her head down upon his knee.

“Oh, Gregory, Gregory, take me home !” she wailed, “I don’t want anything but to go home. I am so tired of being on the yacht ; I am so tired of foreign people. I am tired of everything but you, Greg. I want to go home. Do take me home.”

He drew her into his arms and soothed her by every tender word that he knew.

“Of course I will take you home,” he said. “We have only stayed away out of consideration for you. For myself, I don’t care in the least how people look or what people say. It was for you that we went away, dearest, and, if you wish it, for you we will go back again. We must stay here the night, but we will go to-morrow, if you like. You would rather go by the yacht than by the ordinary boats? If you like, we will cross to-night to Newhaven.”

She looked up eagerly.

“I don’t think I felt it so much,” she said, a sob catching her breath, “until I was so near. When I was hundreds and thousands of miles away I did not feel it so terribly ; but to be so near—to be almost within sight—oh, it is maddening ! Dear boy, let us leave the yacht here—let us go to-night, without the delay of a moment. Don’t think me silly—I have been away so long. I want to go home—I want to eat an English dinner—I want to buy some English clothes—I want to be in England again.”

“Then we will cross to-night. It is all quite simple. Tell Cesarine to pack your things and to be ready to go when the boat starts. I think it is at one or half-past one.”

She was but a gay butterfly of a thing, for his consent

served to put her into the highest and most brilliant of spirits. She went about the yacht choosing such things as she would want, giving directions to Cesarine, and ever and anon a gay snatch of song was on her lips. They went and dined in the town, and by midnight all was ready for their journey.

So Gregory Alison and Mona Beresford went back to London again.

"Oh, how good it is to be in London on an April morning!" she cried, as they sat at breakfast in an hotel in Piccadilly. "Oh, Greg, what a sense of life! How lovely it all is! After all, there is no place like London, is there?"

Poor Mona! Poor Mona! The words were scarcely out of her mouth when the door opened and two ladies walked into the room. The one was the old Duchess of Bandon, the other a young girl who had been, in former days, one of Mona Beresford's most intimate friends.

"Oh, Grannie!" cried Mona, jumping up and running to meet the old lady.

The old Duchess drew herself up and deliberately pushed her companion behind her.

"Excuse me," she said, "I am the Dowager Duchess of Bandon. I don't know you."

"There is no reason——" began Gregory Alison, who had left his chair.

"Sir, I do not know you," interrupted the Duchess with a cold, disdainful glance. "I have no wish to know you or your companion. Be good enough not to intrude yourselves upon us further."

For a moment Mona Beresford stood like one paralysed; then, with a wild glance at Gregory, she turned and went swiftly out of the room.

Before he followed her he uttered one scathing sentence to the old lady, who was still standing in an attitude both scornful and repellent.

"You might have spared her that, your—Grace!" he said, between his teeth. And then, turning on his heel, he too went out of the room.

He found Mona lying upon her bed in an agony of distress and humiliation.

"Oh, Greg, Greg, take me away; take me back again," she cried. "I have had more than enough of London. I was so happy this morning. Take me back; I will never ask to come again. Never! never!"

So the two went back to the *Mona* still lying in the basin at Dieppe.

Mona would not set foot on shore again after she had once gone aboard of the yacht.

"Take me away! Take me where I shall never see English people any more!" was all that she would say. "I forgot—I have been so long with you, and so much to you, that I forgot altogether that I am what the world calls a thing of shame. I don't feel shameful, Gregory; I don't feel wicked; but I suppose I am."

"If you are, I am," he interrupted.

"Well, I suppose we are. You are wicked, and I am wicked, and our sin has found us out. But I don't feel so; I don't feel any different to what I was before; and when Grannie looked at me with steely eyes that went through my very soul, it was as if God Himself was looking at me. The very heart within me turned to water, and I wish I could have died there and then."

"No, no, you mustn't say that. I won't have you say such things," he interrupted.

She turned her great grey eyes upon him.

"Am I still so precious to you?" she asked, wistfully. He caught her in his arms.

"Oh, my dear, do you need to ask that question? Is not my whole life an answer? Surely, surely, surely!"

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Nearly three months had gone by. After a few days,

during which the stores of the *Mona* were replenished, the yacht had sailed out between the jetties at Dieppe and set her prow towards the summer seas. The two aboard of her had given up all hopes of any reconciliation with those at home, of any reinstatement of Mona's lost name.

Miss Mallinder was still holding out against her happiness and Gregory's freedom. Nothing could be done, and since Mona Beresford had proved so sensitive to the opinion of the world they had no choice but to sail indefinitely here and there, two human ships, morally rudderless, drifting about on life's ocean, whither the winds of fate and fancy chose to take them.

Three months had gone by, and those on board of the beautiful white yacht had come to find themselves in a sad situation. Those who sail the seas must meet with foul weather sometimes. They had been in the past singularly fortunate, having missed at least a dozen storms by what Gregory called the skin of their teeth. But now they were in for it at last, and the soul of Mona Beresford was sick within her.

"Shall we live through it, Greg?" she asked, when he came down into the saloon to see how she was faring.

"Oh, yes," he answered cheerfully; "the skipper thinks the worst of it is over."

But the cheerfulness was assumed, and the answer was a lie. The skipper knew that the worst was not over, and that in any case their chance was but a slender one.

So the hours dragged on, the dainty vessel straining and groaning gallantly along, along the way to destruction.

Why prolong it? A few hours went by, and Gregory Alison went down in search of Mona for the last time. He caught her in his arms.

"Dearest," he said, "I have bad news for you. You gave up all for me, because we were everything to each other; tell me that you have not repented—I mean, in your heart."

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